



# **The Synagogues of Kerala: Their Architecture, History, Context, and Meaning**

by Jay Arthur Waronker

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MacDougall, Bonnie Graham (Chairperson)

Chusid, Jeffrey M. (Minor Member)

**THE SYNAGOGUES OF KERALA, INDIA:  
THEIR ARCHITECTURE, HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND MEANING**

A Thesis

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by

Jay Arthur Waronker

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to record for the first time the architectural history of the functioning, decommissioned but still standing, and lost synagogues in the southernmost Indian State of Kerala on the Malabar Coast. Throughout India, there are today thirty-five existing or former Jewish houses of prayer, built by distinct communities of Jews, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, and the oldest ones are in Kerala. Early Kerala synagogues, realized during the eleventh through the mid-sixteenth century, no longer exist. The Kerala Jewish community, who are believed to have first settled in and around the ancient port town of Cranganore near the Arabian Sea, suffered rounds of persecution during the medieval and early modern periods. In the process, the Jews had to abandon previously built synagogues.

Shifting to various places just outside of Cranganore, the Kerala Jews built new synagogues. While some of these houses of prayer likewise do not survive since the Jews remained in locations temporarily or this newer round of synagogues were also attacked and destroyed by hostile human or natural forces, fortunately synagogue construction from the mid-sixteenth century onwards still stands – albeit often in altered states. Until the mid-twentieth century, Kerala had eight Jewish communities each having its own synagogue. Collectively known as the Cochin, or the more inclusive label of Kerala Jews, they were made up of two informally defined subgroups who built houses of prayer. The Malabar Jews, who had lived in Kerala far longer than their Paradesi coreligionists, had seven synagogues. The Paradesi Jews had just one building, of the same name, which was originally built in 1568.

Since 1990, I have been involved in synagogue study and documentation. My interest lies in non-Western regions of the world where Jewish communities once thrived yet, owing to social or political change over the sixty years, are today in irreversible decline or extinct. India is one such case. Over the course of funded visits, I visited and surveyed its thirty-four synagogues that once served four of the country's distinct groups of Jews: the Bene Israel, Baghdadi, Benai Menashe, and Cochin (Kerala) communities. These synagogues, located in various areas of the large subcontinent ranging from the largest cities to the smallest villages, are in various states of preservation. Today, many no longer function as Jewish houses of prayer and some have been demolished since my project's inception. Among 1.17 billion Indians, the Jewish population currently stands at no more than 4,500 (2001 Census of India). For this thesis, I focused on the synagogues built by the Kerala Jews. At their height, the population of the community is estimated to have been around 2,500 people, but today, according to a community census, it numbers no more than forty-five.

Seven synagogue buildings have managed to survive in Kerala despite this overwhelming decline in the community's population since the mid-1950s due to immigration to Israel. Constructed out of locally available materials and using time-tested building techniques, these synagogues are prime expressions of the centuries-old vernacular architectural and planning traditions of Kerala. This is a heritage made up of a cornucopia of secular and religious buildings erected by both natives and visiting imperialists. These design influences were in turn combined with an assortment of Jewish liturgical requirements to complete a distinct and beautiful synagogue aesthetic.

Of Kerala extant synagogue buildings, only one is a functioning house of prayer. The others, left behind by the Jews when they moved en masse to Israel beginning in 1955, came to be rented or sold, began serving other purposes, or slowly deteriorated. In recent years, however, the synagogues have come to be recognized as invaluable cultural and architectural markers. As this happens, some are being restored. These renewal

efforts draw to light a growing awareness and appreciation of communities in lesser known places in the world where Jews in the ancient tradition of the Diaspora established themselves and built synagogues. Even though the original creators and patrons of these religious buildings are temporal beings, the synagogues have remained as evidence of the way things were. Through the use of photography, measured architectural drawings, detailed watercolor renderings, interviews among members of the remaining or former Kerala Jewish community, careful personal observation and note taking, local narratives and legends, folksongs sung exclusively by the women of the Kerala Jewish community, consultations with local historians and preservationists, and drawing from a rich collection of existing literature, this thesis brings to light the architecture of these Indian Jewish buildings in the context of the region's social and religious history, climate and topography, traditions of building, and overall sense of place.

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jay A. Waronker, born in Atlanta Georgia and a graduate of its public high school system, was educated in architecture at the University of Michigan and Harvard University. After completing his apprenticeship with Robert A. M. Stern Architects in New York and passing his licensing examination, he returned to his birthplace in 1994 to establish an architectural practice specializing in residential design. There he completed several published and awarded projects. In addition to his professional practice, since 1996 Waronker has taught on the university level courses in architectural design, drawing, painting, architectural theory, graphic communication, architectural history, and a class on the “City as Text.” For eleven years, Waronker served on the faculty at Southern Polytechnic State University in Atlanta in its Department of Architecture, where he was also its Interim Chair. He also taught at Georgia Institute of Technology, Emory University, North Dakota State University, Duksung Women’s University in Seoul, and North China University of Technology in Beijing in a visiting capacity.

Along with professional practice and academic instruction, Waronker has for years pursued research in the field of architectural history. In 1990, he was awarded grants through the Asian Cultural Council, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture to begin documenting India’s thirty-five synagogues. He returned to India in 1994, through funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Graham Foundation, and the Bokser Memorial Foundation, and again in 2000, as a Fulbright scholar, to complete detailed watercolors renderings, in the centuries-old tradition of hand drawings, and select architectural

drawings of these synagogues dating from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Waronker's paintings have been extensively exhibited in a variety of venues in the United States and abroad.

In early 2005, Waronker was awarded grants through the Koret Foundation and Marian and Abraham Sofaer of Palo Alto California to initiate an effort to restore and make use of the no longer functioning synagogues at Kerala in southwestern India. With Dr. Shalva Weil of Hebrew University, he traveled to India for this project. From this visit, Waronker, with Dr. Weil and Marian Sofaer, founded and served as curator for India's first Jewish museum. Opened in February 2006 in the Chendamangalam Synagogue restored by the government of Kerala, this museum was funded by the Abramowitz Family of Ross California and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life of San Francisco. It is today operated by the Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archeology. Each year, travelers from throughout India and the world visit the cultural venue to learn about the cultural history and synagogue architecture of the former Jewish community in Chendamangalam. As a result of this successful project, and with the support of the Koret Foundation, Waronker's current effort is serving as an advisor to the Kerala government for the restoration of a second synagogue in Kerala. Work on bringing this building back to form, located in the city of Parur and dating in part to the early seventeenth century, began in April 2010.

In 2005-6, Waronker received a second Fulbright grant to document via careful drawings and watercolor renderings the synagogues and other Jewish architecture of Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and parts of South Africa. He returned to the African continent in 2008, with the support of the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, to expand his project to include the Jewish architecture of Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. This work is now being exhibited, and articles on some of the synagogues have since been published.



Waronker's plan is to eventually include the synagogues and other Jewish architecture of Ghana, Nigeria, and Eritrea.

In Memory of My Father, William L. Waronker

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## PREFACE

The genesis of my interest in the synagogues of India can be traced to a particular moment, place, and source that I can recall vividly. During my studies in architecture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in the late 1980s, while browsing in the stacks of the library one afternoon, I came across a small book titled *The Synagogue*. Within its pages was a chart listing where synagogues existed country by country along with a tally. To my surprise, India was included. How could a place so overwhelmingly associated to my consciousness at the time with Hindu gods, Mughal emperors, the Taj Mahal, Buddhist stupas, turbaned Sikhs, the British Raj, Mahatma Gandhi, sari clad women, crowded streets, Bollywood films, luscious mangoes, and spicy curries also be home to Jews and synagogues? I checked out the book and read it cover to cover but, aside from piquing my interest, nothing immediately changed or developed. Still I knew that some day, some way something would come of this revelation. When the time and conditions was right, an apposite plan of action focusing on these curious religious buildings in an all too distant and unfamiliar land would come into being and consume my time and attention. It was my karma.

For the next few years, India's synagogues remained in the back of my mind. By that time, I had graduated and moved to New York to work for the architect, Robert A. M. Stern. For four years I devoted considerable time and energy to various exciting and satisfying architectural projects scattered around this country and abroad, and I took and passed the grueling four-day architecture licensing examination. Then a yearning to explore other facets and possibilities of architecture and its profession set in. Though I enjoyed designing and practicing architecture, something that I continue to do with pleasure today, I also got delight from looking at and thinking about buildings and

designed spaces. Akin to bird watchers and storm chasers, I became obsessed with exploring architecture in situ. I not only paid attention to its style and aesthetic, but also to dates of construction, form, design language, tectonics, scale, proportion, materiality, details, site issues, craft, context, function, and patronage. I became curious about why the building looked the way it did, how it was realized, its current purpose and condition, and the human component. New York was replete with gazing possibilities, and I took advantage of my residence in the great metropolis to savor its architectural traditions. My interest in the synagogues of India resurfaced.

As both a practicing Jew and architect, I have long had an interest in the synagogue as a building typology. Growing up in Atlanta, my family and I were members in Congregation *Ahavath Achim* (Brotherly Love), one of the largest conservative synagogues in the United States. Even though I no longer reside there full time, I still think of this impressive 1950s Modern synagogue as my spiritual home. When I began serious travel as an adult, in the tradition of the architectural pilgrimage, I sought out synagogues wherever I went, be it Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, Athens, Cairo, Jerusalem, Singapore, Harbin, Hong Kong, Harare, Cape Town, Santiago, Caracas, and Montreal. I slowly acquired a collection of photographs, film slides, and books on synagogue architecture. When I attended services at synagogues *B'nai Jeshurun* (Children of Israel), *Rodef Shalom* (Pursuers of Peace), or *Shearith Israel* (Remnant of Israel) while living in Manhattan, I went for spatial and not simply spiritual fulfillment. To all rabbis, please forgive me. Amid religious prayer, my mind strayed into a different sort of divine inspiration. Reflecting on what I saw sitting in these and other sanctuaries, my eyes wandered and my psyche wondered. Why did these religious buildings, ones serving an almost universally minority faith in a variety of places, look a certain way and how were they perceived and judged by those within the community and by outsiders? And how did their physical presence shape and define the people using or interacting



with them? In time, I likewise began to think about the synagogues in India, buildings I had never visited and knew little about, in similar fashion.

My initial preoccupation with the synagogues in India is something that I could not explain. I had no ethnic or ancestral connection to these religious buildings yet alone to any aspect of the faraway land in which they stood. No member of my family or close friend had ever visited India to my knowledge. In my college experience to date, not a single course in Indian architecture had been offered. Although there was no obvious impetus for my burgeoning interest in India, I was inexplicably drawn to its culture and traditions, particularly in connection to Judaism. In the same way that I had studied the synagogues and other buildings in my own city, I became curious about the seemingly (at that time) incongruous Jewish houses of prayer set in an Indian landscape.

On some weekends I scoured the extraordinary libraries of New York in search of information on India's synagogues, and I sought out synagogue and Indo-Judaic scholars living in the City who could help in my quest to learn more. Dr. Carol Krinsky, an accomplished scholar on European synagogues, helped direct my efforts. In my limited free time, since working for Mr. Stern was consuming, I attended lectures and programs on India, and the downtown restaurants of Little India became my haunts. In the days before the web and email communication, with the help of Sam Daniel, a Mumbai-born Bene Israel Jew living in Manhattan, I obtained the names and addresses of many Indian subcontinent synagogues and wrote to each one. Some of my letters elicited gracious replies, providing me with tidbits of information and history, while many others were never answered. I still recall, now some twenty years later, a returned letter that I had sent to the synagogue in Karachi, Pakistan. Stamped something to the effect of "addressee unknown and return to sender," it had taken nearly a year to complete its travel route. Only later did I come to realize that the majority of synagogues I had written were marginally operating or no longer functioning, and at these buildings no one was available to reply.

Soon it became clear that I had exhausted the Indo-Judaic synagogue resources in New York and, as a logical next step, a trip to India was needed. When I was awarded research grants from the Asian Cultural Council, Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and International Survey for Jewish Monuments in the summer of 1990 at the time that my long-term design project at work was nearing completion, I asked for a leave of absence from my job. Once it was granted and a sublease on my apartment had been arranged, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1990, my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, I set off for the first time to India. After years of advanced field work and months of trip planning, my departure marked the inauguration of the actual effort to survey and to document the country's thirty-five synagogues scattered around this great broad land. While I did not realize it from the onset, this was the beginning of an on-going adventure that has lasted twenty years. Along the way, I returned to India for several follow-up visits and completed a body of work that has been widely published and exhibited. I also co-founded and co-implemented India's first Jewish museum in a government-restored former synagogue in Chendamangalam (or Chennamangalam) Kerala that opened in 2006 and more recently began serving as an advisor to the government of Kerala on the restoration of a second former Jewish house of prayer in Parur (or Paravoor) Kerala. This building, dating in part from the early seventeenth century, is one of the first to be included as part of Kerala's Muziris Heritage Site project. I even returned to school first at Harvard University, where I studied under the brilliant Indian art and architectural historian Dr. Pramod Chandra, and later at a ripe age to Cornell University with help from Dr. Bonnie MacDougall for two advanced graduate degrees dedicated in part to this work. Another culmination of my years of interest and dedication to the synagogues of the Indian subcontinent is this written and illustrated thesis.

***PART ONE***

**LAYING THE FOUNDATION**

## ***CHAPTER ONE***    ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIETY

This thesis focuses on a specific building typology – the synagogues of Kerala in India – within the context of the region’s history, identity, development, and sense of place. Three primary queries to be examined closely are why these Kerala synagogues as objects appeared the way they do, what were their distinct architectural and cultural influences, and how they became mediums for elucidating the conditions of a people. This thesis also calls attention to a vanishing tradition in Kerala in that seven structures built as synagogues have managed to survive despite the overwhelming shrinkage in the region’s Jewish population beginning five and a half decades ago. Although the once vibrant community, as a result of a reversal in the Diasporic pattern begun during ancient times, cannot be salvaged, some of its former Jewish houses of prayer, buildings that were left behind by the emigrating Jews and have managed to hold on for dear life, are today being recognized as invaluable markers within Kerala’s history. They are now being carefully restored or at least better maintained as cultural venues through mostly government and some private efforts.

Finally this essay seeks to place the synagogues of Kerala in the overall framework of Jewish architecture. They are part of the long history of designing, constructing, and utilizing as well as establishing purpose and meaning to first the ancient Court of the Tabernacle followed by the Temple in Jerusalem and later Diasporic synagogues throughout many reaches of the globe. An interesting side question is whether Kerala’s synagogues may have responded to or even helped mold Jewish architectural and liturgical conventions elsewhere in the world.

Over time, a kaleidoscope of forces and factors helped shape the way architecture was realized in the southwestern-most, Malabar (“place of the hills” in the native

Malayalam language) coastal area of the Indian sub-continent where Kerala lies.<sup>1</sup> Through the fusion of these constituents, its unique way of building came into form. Some of these influences stemmed from the natural context, including the tropical climate, annual monsoons, verdant landscape, inter-coastal waterways, connection to the sea, vast availability of lumber, accessibility of local stone, and other particular natural resources. Other sources of inspiration were cultural, such as the region's blend of religions, habit of tolerance, small town life, and distinct rituals and customs. Even more influences were derived from Kerala's centuries-old seafaring traditions, interactions with foreigners, lucrative spice trade, and port economy. All had considerable effects on the region's architecture and construction techniques, including at the synagogues, just as they did on the daily lives of Kerala's people.

Kerala's architecture has been affected by an assortment of human variables. Religious institutions, native leaders, and visiting imperialists built countless structures, several of them architecturally important, which in turn influenced more modest and ordinary buildings, including the synagogues. Kerala is notable for its religious diversity, which is evinced in the extraordinary repertory of religious architecture found throughout Kerala. Besides the synagogues there are Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples, mosques, churches, monasteries, rock-cut sanctuaries, stupas, shrines, megaliths, tomb cells, pagodas, and ceremonial sites. Alongside these is a cornucopia of secular structures built by natives or European colonial visitors, including forts, palaces, town halls, courthouses, government buildings, cultural centers, ports, museums, market places, schools, military installations, factories, warehouses, transportation facilities, and an array of domestic dwellings. Among the outside forces that had an adverse impact on Kerala's synagogues were the Moors who as Arab traders established themselves in Kerala some time during the medieval period, the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and lastly Tipu Sultan of the Kingdom of Mysore in the 1780s.

Kerala's varied secular and religious history coupled with its architectural legacy provides the opportunity not only to examine a variety of building techniques and traditions but also to ponder how specific cultural attitudes can be manifested in or attached to architecture. In Kerala, with its string of small towns and villages intricately linked by a system of winding natural water canals and narrow roadways, the practice of architectural borrowing and exchanging has long been particularly pervasive. The synagogues were one example of this trans-societal building legacy.

The Jews' decision to borrow many of their neighbors' customs and practices including many architectural ones from others living in Kerala should not imply that they were not a full part of the history and fabric of the place. Rather, the converse was true. The freedom of opportunity to make use of what others have done gives affirmation to a level of cooperation, attainment, interaction, or even respect for one's neighbors. And there were certainly instances when the exchange extended the other direction, such as with the introduction of some Hebrew terminology into native language or in the ways that the Jews of Kerala through their professional and personal work gave back to the local community in physical and intangible ways. These events are testimony to a native consciousness and perhaps pride in the centuries-old Jewish presence and contribution within Kerala. Even in those instances when Kerala's Jews used architectural traditions introduced to the region by antagonists such as the Portuguese, the Jews did so because by that time these devices had become so ingrained in local culture that they had become not only neutral but attractive. Here an aesthetic concern for building in the accepted if not fashionable ways of the region had overcome any offensive religious or political ideology or association.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years a wide body of work focusing on Kerala's Jews has been published. Although there was a small group who began the process in the early decades of the twentieth century, such as David Sassoon (Sassoon 1932) and Bar Giora (Bar Giora 1958), since the 1980s the field has come into its own. This most recent literature

is authored by a variety of Indian and international scholars who have devoted years and considerable energy to the field. Through their efforts much of the complex history of Kerala's communities of Jews was unraveled and revealed. In the 1970s, the Kerala historian M. G. S. Narayanam analyzed the privileges extended to the Kerala Jews by a Chera emperor, Bhaskara Ravi Varma II, as detailed in engraved copper plates that likely date to the very early eleventh-century, and his work in the field continued into more recent years (Narayanam 1972, Narayanam 1996, and Narayanam 2003). Adv. Prem Doss Swami Doss Yehudi, a Dravidian Jew, lawyer, and writer, produced a history of the Kerala Jews in 1989 (Yehudi 1989). Thomas Timberg, an American academic, edited a history of the Kerala Jews in the mid-1980s (Timberg 1986).

In the early 1990s, the Israeli scholar Meir Bar Ilan explored contacts between the Kerala Jews and those in Yemen (Bar Ilan 1992). In 2000, a scholar of Italian Jewish writings by the name of Arthur Lesley provided an account of late fifteenth century Cochin Jews (Lesley 2000). Drawing from this, the Israeli art historian Orna Eliyahu-Oron a few years later focused on the *heckalot*, or arks, of Kerala's synagogues and their possible Italian derivation (Eliyahu-Oron 2004). The American historian Jonathan Schorsch's recent contribution to the field involves the social divisions among the distinct White, Black, and Brown communities of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Kerala Jews (Schorsch 2004). Beginning in the 1990s, the literary scholar Bindu Malieckal explored mentions of the Jews of Kerala in notable writings ranging from as far back William Shakespeare to the contemporary work of Salman Rushdie (Malieckal 1997 and Malieckal 2001). Historian Brian Weinstein examined the Kerala Jews' dealings in the region's lucrative pepper and spice industry over the centuries (Weinstein 2002). His work expanded on the earlier scholarship by N. Roby (Roby 1955) and Walter Fischel (Fischel 1949 and Fischel 1981). In 1993, J. B. Segal, a professor emeritus of Semitic languages at the University of London, provided a general but well written history of the Jews of Cochin (Segal 1993).

For more than thirty-five years Dr. Shalva Weil, a social anthropologist at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has authored and edited an extensive collection of articles and books on the history and community of the Kerala Jews. Among her accomplishments is a book that she edited combining the work of an international collection of scholars who wrote about the religious, social, cultural, and architectural traditions of India's Bene Israel, Baghdadi, and Kerala Jews. Included in this book is my own chapter on India's synagogue architecture (Weil 2002). Beginning in the early 1960s, Johanna Spector, a Lithuanian-born American historian who died in 2008, spent considerable time completing an impressive general history of the Cochin Jews (Spector 1980), and starting in the 1970s Florida International University Professor Nathan Katz with his wife, Ellen Goldberg undertook years of observing and writing about the history, customs, and life-cycle practices of the community (Katz 1993, Katz 2001, and Katz with Goldberg 2003). Their work is particularly well regarded for its detailed observation, and Katz is the founder of the annual *Journal for Indo-Judaic Studies*.

Another eminent Kerala Jewish scholar over recent decades has been Barbara Johnson, an American anthropologist and now retired professor from Ithaca College in New York. Johnson first traveled to Kerala in the mid-1970s, and she continues to work very actively in the field today. Among Johnson's accomplishments is her book capturing Kerala Jewish history through a locally born Jew, Ruby Daniel, as well as her study of the community through Jewish folksongs sung in Malayalam exclusively by Kerala Jewish women (Johnson 1995, Johnson 2000, Johnson 2001, and Johnson 2004). She drew from the earlier work in the genre by the late Shirley Isenberg in Israel (Isenberg 1976) as well as Scaria Zacharia (Gamliel with Zacharia 2005 and Zacharia 2003) and P. M. Jussay in Kerala (Jussay 2005). The Israeli scholar Ophira Gamliel has also worked on the Jewish Malayalam folksongs (Gamliel with Zacharia 2005).

The Israeli Rivka Neumann, before her untimely death a few years ago, conducted extensive interviews with extant or former Kerala Jews in Israel that have never been



published. So too has the Kerala-born Israeli Galia Hacco as well Shimon Koder, who both now live in Israel. Koder's focus was on the venerable Hallegua Family as large landowners. The interview process is on-going, and over the next years the information gathered will surely be written about and debated. Hacco was also responsible for a chapter on the ritual cycle of Kerala Jewish holidays (Weil 2002). Orpha Slapak, a deceased cultural historian, was the curator of a major exhibition on the Jews of India at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1995. She was also responsible for a thick catalog in association with this museum project (Slapak 1995). Along with Barbara Johnson's abbreviated history of the Kerala Jewish community and Slapak's sections of ceremonial objects, dress, customs and ceremonies, the catalog also included an article by Shalom Sabar on the community's marriage customs (Slapak 1995). In the late 1980s, the American Marcia Walterstein revealed a new perspective on the social divisions among Kerala Jews (Walterstein 1988), and the American professor of religion Barbara Holdrege has also authored work on this topic (Holdrege 1990).

Several other individuals have written about the Kerala Jews in helpful albeit more abbreviated fashion, frequently combining them with the complex histories of India's other major Jewish communities – the Bene Israel, Baghdadis, and Bnei Menashe. The work of Joan Rolland (Rolland 1989), T. V. Parasuram (Parasuram 1982), and Benjamin Israel (Israel 1987) come to mind. Within the Kerala Jewish community itself, there have been a handful of small popular publications written over the decades, such as ones by A. B. Salem (Salem 1929), S. S. Koder (Koder 1968), Sammy Hallegua (Weil 2002), and Isaac Joshua (Joshua 1988), which have added from modest to more ambitious fashion to the community's story. Recently, the writer Edna Fernandes was responsible for a decisively romanticized novel titled *The Last Jews of Cochin* (Fernandes 2008). This book is notable not for any scholarly history or but for its popular and widespread appeal to those knowing little if anything about Kerala's Jewish history.

Since the scholars and experts producing this literature as abovementioned have most often been anthropologists, religionists, cultural historians, or generalist writers and none have been architects and architectural historians, the synagogues may have been mentioned in the context of social history, legend, or as a background to life-cycle and communal events, but they were never the principle subject of any of their investigations. The existing literature normally makes references in to the synagogues, but in generalized or incomplete form. An exception is the chapter on the Paradesi Synagogue by the Israeli architect Ilana Weil (Weil 2002) and in part the work of Orna Eliyahu-Oron, who as an artist and art historian looked at select liturgical objects within some of the synagogues (Eliayhu-Oran 2004). To date, there is no published body of work that more completely and inclusively covers the many architectural nuances of the synagogues built by the Kerala Jews. This type of study might include such topics as a history of the buildings' materials and construction techniques, their response to climate and topology, precedents for the overall Kerala synagogue typology, and a description and analysis of the indoor and outdoor spaces of the synagogue compounds.

While some synagogues in Kerala and elsewhere in India have been a part of published work on the overall building type globally, appearing in works by Uri Kaploun of Israel (Kaploun 1973), Brian de Breffny of Ireland (de Breffny 1978), the Israeli Neil Folberg (Folberg 1995), H. A. Meek (Meek 1995) from England, and the American Sam Gruber (Gruber 1999 and Gruber 2003), the space given over to them has been limited if not minute. Since the Kerala synagogues hold a distinct place in the annals of Indian as well as Jewish architecture, in this thesis I hope to provide a more complete and detailed history, description, contextualization, and explanation of them, serving as the interpreter between these Jewish houses of prayer and a curious audience. This thesis represents not only an extension of my own personal engagement of many years but my professional attempt to fill a gap in the existing literature on Kerala's historic communities of Jews.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, 81% of the world's thirteen million Jews are concentrated in just two countries: Israel and the United States (*The New World Almanac* 2009). Most of the remainder, all but 3%, is accounted for in a handful of other countries: France, Canada, United Kingdom, Russia, Argentina, Germany, Australia, Brazil, Ukraine, and South Africa. So it may be a surprise to both Jews and non-Jews alike to learn that there have long been countless other comparatively minute Jewish communities scattered around the globe.<sup>3</sup> To people who commonly or immediately associate Jewish life with certain identifiable and recognizable "Jewish" places, these less familiar and even unknown enclaves would be considered out of the ordinary and "exotic." Yet these communities, some always small and others once sizeable, were continuing the ancient tradition of the Diaspora, meaning dispersion. Be it Iran, Syria, China, Myanmar, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Uruguay, Chile, New Zealand, the town of Clio South Carolina where my mother grew up, or so many other places including India and specifically Kerala, Jews arrived and established themselves, and they in many instances led comfortable and productive lives if not thrived, albeit by and large provisionally. To those living in these various places and practicing their faith, being Jewish most often seemed normal if not natural. It was a matter of what they knew, and thus commonplace. This was particularly the case when the Jews were not only tolerated but embraced, yet even at places where they were not altogether free, their Jewish identity regularly persevered for some time.

This tradition of dissemination, which has been endlessly undertaken over the years, began no later than the third century BCE, when Jews first shifted from Judea to Egypt, Babylonia, and other regional lands before moving afar in subsequent centuries. Sometimes this was by choice, in other instances by force. Through waves of immigration spread over millennia, the Jewish people established themselves all over the world. The Jewish settlements in Kerala, their story conveyed by the abovementioned scholars and writers who have studied and written about them, and in the ways that I will

discuss the architecture of their synagogues, mark just a single albeit distinct chapter of overall Jewish history.

Linked by popular trade routes over land and the oceans and seas, India and neighboring Myanmar (Burma) and Pakistan over time came to be a part of the Diaspora where a sizeable and active Jewish population came by their own volition. Although there were indeed some significant dark periods for the Jews living in Kerala caused mostly by visiting forces, much of the time they coexisted in harmony with their immediate Indian neighbors. With this came organizing congregations and constructing synagogues. While the earliest of these houses of prayer dating to the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries perished many years ago, as did one confirmed by an building inscription from the mid-fourteenth century, those from the from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries still stand. These extant synagogues, though altered and revived over the years, are not only the oldest found in India but in the British Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup> When also placed within the context of Jewish houses of prayer world wide, they stand out for their age and distinct architectural and liturgical qualities.

Today, due to social and political change over the last sixty years resulting mostly from World War II and the end of colonialism, the Jewish communities of the Indian subcontinent, similar to ones in other regions of Asia, within vast areas of Africa, and throughout parts of Europe particularly affected by the Holocaust, have dwindled significantly, and the synagogues which served them vary in their level of preservation. Except for *Shaar Hashamaim* (Gate of Heaven), a Bene Israel synagogue founded in 1879 in the northeastern Mumbai suburb of Thana and with a membership today accounting for over 80% of India's total Jewish population, no other congregation can be described as thriving while many maintain marginal existences and other have closed or been converted to other functions.<sup>5</sup> At its height in the early 1950s shortly after Indian Independence from Britain in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population of the country, always infinitesimal by any means, numbered

according to local sources between 30,000 and 40,000 among some 365 million nationals (1951 Census of India).<sup>6</sup> Of those, an estimated 2,500 lived in Kerala (Hallegua 2004 and Josephai 2008). In contrast today, only some 4,500 Jews reside in India among a national population of 1.17 billion (2001 Census of India). Based on a 2010 count, Kerala is now home to only 40 to 45 Jews (Hacco, Waronker, and Weil 2010).<sup>7</sup>

During my visits to India since 1990, I have witnessed first hand the condition of the thirty-five synagogues scattered about India. Some of the country's Jewish houses of prayer continue to be maintained, some quite well and others just barely, by fully operational congregations, through proceeds from rental property purchased long ago, making use of building funds established decades ago when congregations were active and prosperous, or via outside donors and sponsors (such is the case with the 2009/10 restoration by a private foreign donor of the 1860s *Magen David* (Shield of David) Synagogue in Mumbai). Others are in decrepit condition and continue to deteriorate due to the neglect or lack of funds of the skeletal community, or the region's harsh climate and annual monsoons.

In India there is a curious practice of allowing the interiors of once active but today idle synagogues to remain intact as if the entire congregation is merely on holiday. *Neve Shalom* (Origin of Peace) of 1911, a Baghdadi Synagogue in central Kolkata (Calcutta), immediately comes to mind. This may in part stem for the notion recounted to me on numerous occasions by Indians of varying religions and social backgrounds that the purchase any former religious dwelling will bring the new owner bad karma. It may also be due to the case that synagogues as buildings are less adaptable to becoming more majority-faith Hindu temples or even mosques. This is contrast to the situation in sub-Saharan Africa during the past few decades where, based on my own observations in the region during my Fulbright grant period, former synagogues have routinely been purchased and adapted to African churches and, in one case, a Hindu temple. Over the years, a few Jewish houses of prayer in India, despite the issue of ill karma, have

nonetheless been sold and converted to other functions. A Bene Israel synagogue in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, for example, today serves as a classroom, a Kerala synagogue in Mala functions as community hall, and the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam Kerala now operates as a plant nursery and fish shop owned by a native-born Jewish man. Others from both the Baghdadi and Bene Israel communities have managed to survive, serving a minute albeit still organized community. In some cases these synagogues have been lovingly restored, as is the case with Kolkata's 1884 Italian Renaissance-revival *Magen David* (Shield of David) which was rehabilitated in time for its centenary celebration, while in other instances the buildings have been poorly or insensitively renovated, damaging the integrity of the original architectural design.

Even more unfortunate is that in each passing year another of India's synagogues is damaged, destroyed, demolished, or even relocated in part abroad. Since beginning my synagogue work in the Indian subcontinent in late 1990, *Musmeah Yeshua* (Deliverer of Salvation) Synagogue from 1893 in Yangon, Myanmar was severely damaged by Cyclone Nargis in 2008 (and essentially brought back to form), the decommissioned *Magen Aboth* (Shield of Sons) Synagogue dating from 1933 in Kolkata (Calcutta) was razed to the ground so that the property could be redeveloped, the inactive mid-twentieth century *Rodef Shalom* (Pursuers of Peace) prayer hall within an early twentieth century Mumbai *chawl* (a mid-rise tenant building) was burned during the infamous Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992, the active *Ohel David* (Tent of David) Synagogue of 1867 in Pune suffered fire damage at the time of the First Gulf War in 1991 yet was renovated, rural mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century Konkan region Jewish houses of prayer have been lost, and the interior finishes of the retired Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Mattancherry, Kochi along with the *heckal* and *tebah* from the Parur Synagogue in Kerala were removed and shipped to Israel in the 1990s. These elements were carefully restored by the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and then assembled together in the form of a permanent period room representing Asian synagogues. The *heckal* and *tebah* from the

Tekkumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam, Kochi and the *heckal* from the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Jew Town, Mattancherry were also taken out, and today they can be found in two synagogues in Israel.

While very recent years have seen a degree of renewed activity and vigor with things Jewish in India, due in part to nostalgic Indian Jewish descendants living in Israel and elsewhere, supportive foreigner Jews, government of Kerala interest in heritage buildings as part of the state's history, an international interest in the northeast hill states Benei Menashe, or so-called Lost Tribe communities of Jews, and the successful organization of *Chabad* religious centers with rabbis in various places around the country, this has had limited impact on the precarious state of several Indian synagogues. This is particularly the case with the Bene Israel ones found in the rural Konkan region. While the Jewish population in India has stabilized during the past decade and travelers from around the world flock to its Jewish sites in ever-increasing numbers, the reality is that many remain threatened if not susceptible to extinction as buildings, particularly in their original built form. Before all was irrevocably changed or lost, I set out on my own some years back through funding from a American government and private sources to record every one of these not in an ideal and original state but in their current albeit imperfect condition through careful watercolor renderings complemented by color photography, select measured orthogonal drawings, and brief written histories and descriptions.

The medium of watercolors in the synagogue documentation process was selected after thoughtful consideration. Following my visit to each of the Indian synagogues, I decided that a careful yet loose and freehand drawing technique was the most appropriate approach. In retrospect, this was a bold move since I had no experience in the medium. Yet watercolors best captured the essence and character of these old, soft-edged, frequently soiled, sometimes gritty, always weathered, and often marginally maintained or derelict buildings. Many were finished in chunam, a polished lime

material, which had been whitewashed or brightly painted. Other buildings constructed out of brick or stone also worked well in watercolor rendering. The medium also seemed sympathetic to the clay tile roofs, wooden details, and terracotta, marble, and other stone tiled surfaces common to the synagogues.

I also drew from the centuries-old and time-tested tradition of the architectural rendering to express and historically record the landscape and built form. Such a convention was particularly pursued in India by such eighteenth and nineteenth-century artists as Thomas and William Daniells, William Carpenter, Frederick de Fabeck, William Simpson, James George Chittagong, Robert Melville Grindlay, and Johan Lockwood Kipling (Pelizzari 2004). Their renderings captured and chronicled both important architectural detail and the spirit of the day, and they are invaluable sources of information years later since many of these places and spaces have been altered and lost.

The watercolors also provide a distinct human quality to my work. Aside from an important personal connection, more information can be accurately and honestly captured through renderings versus photographs whenever dark interiors with deeply-shadowed areas are featured, or in cases when the photographed spaces are artificially lighted or mechanically manipulated. The viewer is often more inclined to pay closer attention, and to scrutinize, a hand drawing than a photograph since the former is recognized as being particularly labor intensive and methodical. To provide legitimacy and some degree of comfort to those believing that photography represented the more honest and hence accepted medium for the serious documentation of buildings, careful attention was given to accuracy of color, context, space, architectural detail, and lighting in my watercolors. With other graphic and written components, the detailed renderings formed the basis for my documentation.

In recent years, the paintings have been exhibited in a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish venues in the United States and abroad and the written work has been published in various sources. The result is that this body of work has aided and educated a broad



audience in a variety of ways. A current example involves the government of Kerala's undertaking to carefully restore the now-closed synagogue in Parur. The watercolor that I completed in the early 1990s revealed areas of the building before they were compromised a few years later, so a copy of it was provided to those handling its restoration. Aided in small part by my careful rendering, as of early 2010 this team of experts is bringing the very derelict synagogue back to form.

My methodology for documenting the synagogues of Kerala also included color photography. At each site visit and with the approval of the local Jewish community or municipality controlling the building, I extensively photographed the neighborhood context, overall exterior and interior spaces of the synagogue, and details of such things as *heckal* carvings, door hardware, roof soffits, stair treads, handrails, floor patterns, balcony brackets, and *tebah* balusters. Since I am not a professional photographer who owns high-quality cameras and equipment, in 2009 and 2010 I commissioned a Kochi photographer, V. Issac Sam, to photograph six of the seven synagogues buildings. Over multiple visits, Sam and his assistant captured these former Jewish houses of prayer. Only the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry, where there is a strict no camera policy, was not professionally photographed. Both my own photographs and those of Sam are included in part in this thesis.

Another part of my process of recording each Kerala synagogue involved architectural drawings. With a tape measure, pencil, and composition notebook in hand, I carefully field measured each building's floor plan, and recorded this information in sketch form. I also field measured building and wall elevations as well as important liturgical elements, such as the *mechitza*, *tebah*, and *heckal*. In some cases, I field measured synagogue site plans. Yet since I always worked alone, I was not able to complete an extensive and comprehensive collection of measured drawings. This is an exhaustive and complicated process requiring a team to divide up the areas to be documented and, if anything, for two to measure and one to simultaneously record the

data. For high and inaccessible areas, more sophisticated equipment is generally needed. I never had such field measuring equipment, which would have aided the documentation process. For my thesis work, I have therefore relied in part on the team work of two independent groups that have field measured some of the Kerala synagogues in the past: *Avi Chai*, an Israeli organization that annually sends a team of architecture students from Israel to a world site to record historic synagogues and a few years ago visited Kerala, and professional staff from the Center for Jewish Art of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who were in Kerala several years ago.

During my long and repeated visits to the Kerala synagogues, I also took extensive field notes of my observations. Examples of these notes include whether the road in front of the building was paved or had mechanical services, the composition and character of neighborhood buildings, the condition and state of preservation of the synagogue, building materials, construction techniques, and craft. If the exterior spaces found at synagogue compound were overgrown, I recorded this in some detail. I took an inventory of furnishings and lighting fixtures in the buildings, art or displayed objects on site, and I recorded floor patterns, stain finishes, paint colors, window and door configurations, and ceiling patterns among many other findings.

Through sensitive observation, much can be learned about the history of a building. Architecture may not literally speak for itself, but by keenly paying attention to it, the built environment communicates considerable information. Verbal exchange with its patron and user may not always be practical or, in cases, available. Yet my methodology also included interviews with remaining members of the Kerala Jewish community knowledgeable about the region's synagogues. Since there are so few local Jews remaining in the area and only a handful of these people were in a position to be helpful, the number of interviews was limited. These interviews, some done on the synagogue buildings premises and others carried out at the interviewer's home or other off-site location, were nevertheless invaluable in revealing more pieces of the

synagogue's architectural and historical puzzle. The elder Malabari Jew Isaac Joshua, for example, was able to recall some details of the Tekkumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam before it was completely rebuilt in the 1930s. Since there is so little recorded information on its predecessor synagogue, Joshua's recollections, although limited and not always precise, were indeed helpful to writing a history about this particular building. Elias "Babu" Josephai, the caretaker of the former Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam for more than three decades, provided a wealth of knowledge at that site. Along with these interviews done in Kerala, I spoke to former Kerala Jews now living in Israel as well. This included a visit to *Moshav* Nevatim near Beersheva to meet with the small staff of the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center.

To assist in placing the Kerala synagogues within a local vernacular context so important for my thesis, several hours were spent during the summer of 2009 in public, private membership, and college libraries in Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram. My time was spent searching through the shelves for books focusing on the architectural and construction traditions of the region. During visits to Kerala in 2006 and 2009, I also met with and interviewed the directors and their staffs of the Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archeology and the Kerala Department of Tourism, both located in Thiruvanthapuram, to discuss the restoration efforts of two Kerala synagogues.

## **CHAPTER TWO**    **EARLY JEWISH ARCHITECTURE**

True to many Jewish communities anywhere in the world, the Jews of Kerala did not necessarily build proper synagogues immediately, electing to use private homes, simple structures, or temporary facilities early on, if any at all. Although various narratives claim that the Jews as traders from the west originating perhaps in Judea, Babylonia, Yemen, or Persia arrived on the shores of Kerala (Figure 1) as far back as two and one half millennia ago on a temporary or permanent basis or, via local legends, that the first Jewish immigrants to arrive along the Malabar Coast came as a result of Chaldean (Babylonian) exile from Jerusalem in 597 BCE, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, continued Roman aggression in the Jewish capital in 136 CE, or migrations from Majorca in 370 CE and again in 499 CE to the port town of Muziris (once referred to by the Kerala Jews as Shingly and also known as Kudangalur and Cranganore/Cranganur; see Figure 4), there are no written records or conclusive accounts of their earliest history, including any about synagogues. The Kerala historian K. K. Adoor put it well when he wrote “our knowledge of the first coming of the Jews is tantalizingly vague and uncertain. It resembles a jigsaw puzzle with many a missing piece” (Salem 1929, 8).

Information on Jewish permanent settlement in Kerala can be derived not from conclusive evidence but through local legends dating from ancient times and continuing to the early Christian period. The story of the Apostle Thomas’ first century visit to South India where he came across Jews that he set out to convert and one from the fourth century involving a Syrian leader Thomas Canai as the head of a group who were the forefathers of Kerala’s Syrian Christians are two examples (Segal 1993, 7 and Timberg 1986, 10). There is recorded documentation of a Jewish presence in Kerala as referenced

on copper plates offering privileges to the Syrian Christians by the Chera king, although the eighth or ninth century date ascribed to them has never been verified. Another set of copper plates, ones given to the Jews of Cranganore also bestowing rights, may provide clear evidence of a Jewish presence in Kerala, but their origin has been much debated. It is not uncommon to read that the date as far back as the fourth century, although the more common account is that Chera King Bhaskara Ravi Varman (962-1020 CE) gave them to Joseph Rabban probably around 1000 CE on behalf of his Jewish community. These plates (Figure 3) granted them seventy two privileges: the right to use a day lamp and a decorative cloth to walk on; the privilege of blowing a trumpet and erecting a palanquin; and the right to obtain exemption and collect taxes. These privileges were bestowed upon the Kerala Jews “for as long as the world, sun, and moon endure” (Weil 2006, 2).

The consensus among historians based on a compellation of limited recorded history and an assortment of oral narratives is that first synagogues were not built in Kerala until the medieval period. Several Kerala Jews and the scholars who have studied the community over the years believe that the earliest synagogues in the region date to the very early eleventh century (Joshua 2009; Josephai 2008 and 2009). According to a narrative, the same Joseph Rabban who accepted the copper plates from Bhaskara Ravi Varman on behalf of his fellow Jews was also given wood by his Highness for the construction of a local synagogue around 1000 CE. While no physical evidence of this and any other medieval-period building survives, my study of the literature, Jewish folksongs, and narratives supports the notion that synagogues may have likely stood in Malabar Coast towns and villages, places now within the modern-day State of Kerala, from this period.<sup>8</sup> A portion of these medieval-period buildings perished when the Kerala Jews had to leave them behind under the threat of persecution or natural disasters. The balance was rebuilt as a result of naturally occurring or intentionally set fires, modernization efforts, or assorted other variables.

The earliest synagogue confirmed by physical evidence, one that stood at Kochangadi, a settlement located on a narrow finger peninsula just south of Mattancherry in Kochi (Figure 4), dates according to the stone inscription to 1344 as already mentioned (Figure 6). This building perished many years ago, yet its inscription stone has managed to survive, and today it can be seen in the courtyard wall of the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry's Jew Town. Synagogues dating from the fifteenth to first half of the sixteenth century are known to have existed, but all vanished as a result of natural or man-induced catastrophes (Sassoon 1932). Although all have been altered in some capacity or partially rebuilt over the years, the oldest extant synagogues in Kerala conclusively date based on physical inscriptions to the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The others, rebuilt over the years as consequences of deliberate attacks, fires, expansions, or complete restorations, are from the eighteenth, nineteenth, or early twentieth centuries.

To better understand the synagogues of Kerala, and to place them within an overall religious as well as architectural context, it seems helpful to first introduce three ancient Jewish building typologies for their pivotal influence: the nomadic Court of the Tabernacle, the Temples in Jerusalem built after the Jews settled in Judea, and the early synagogue. This includes some discussion about their physical properties, functional qualities, liturgical requirements, ceremonial traditions, and terminology of spaces, both interior and exterior, along with fittings, furnishings, and decorative and ritual objects that completed these related yet independently built genres. The history and manifestation of the Tabernacle, Temple, and early synagogue impacted in an assortment of ways subsequent Jewish houses of prayer realized over time, including those eventually built in Kerala. Synagogues as a building type have never abided to a set of building rules since Judaism has no religious text or central authority that have established precise organizational or aesthetic requirements. For this reason, the building typology has never conformed to planning or stylistic rules or been resolved in unique or

recognizable terms. Yet beginning with the earliest Jewish architecture and continuing over time, some design inspirations and guidelines could be said to have been established. As a result, certain physical or spatial expressions, some vague and other more directed, came to be followed. An account of the unstructured nature of synagogue building over the centuries deserves some space in thesis since it may help explain why the Kerala synagogues came to be, or not be, as they are. The final chapters of this thesis and the bulk of my work are comprised of individual histories, descriptions, and evaluations of the lost and extant Kerala synagogues.

As an organized religion dating back at least four millennia, early Judaism required some type of architecture, albeit simple and even portable in form and function. Such structures, including the earliest sanctuaries and altars followed by the Court of the Tabernacle, served the Jews before something more substantive and permanent came into being. According to the Torah, while the Israelites freed from captivity in Egypt were on their journey in the Sinai for forty years, and after God had given to Moses the Ten Commandments recorded on two stone tablets, they built the Court of the Tabernacle (Figure 5). Its design is described in detail in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 32:1-5 and Exodus 37:1-9). According to this text, it was an unroofed double square structure running east-west that measured 100 cubits long by 50 cubits wide by 10 cubits high.<sup>9</sup> It was fabricated of sixty acacia wooden columns set into bronze bases with curtains of linen covered with goat hair and skins. The columns, which were fitted with silver collars and hooks to accept the curtains, were braced with tent ropes and bronze pegs. Entrance into this enclosure was along the latitudinal (short) east end, an arrangement adopted to the Temple in Jerusalem and, centuries later, to some synagogues, including those in Kerala. The entry was masked by a screen of fine linen, embroidered in blue, purple, and scarlet, and suspend from four columns. It could be said that the fineness and brightness of this cloth reappeared in a different application as coverings for Jewish liturgical furnishings and objects in synagogues to come, including all those of Kerala.

Also according to the Book of Exodus, the eastern square of the Tabernacle's enclosure functioned as a forecourt in front of the actual sanctuary. This linear and sequential arrangement of gate, forecourt, and sanctuary again served as a precedent for the Temple, which in time guided the design of some synagogues. Those in Kerala follow such a configuration. Placed to the far west of the Court of the Tabernacle's forecourt square was the sanctuary proper. Its front had no framed opening but was simply closed off by a screen. While the main enclosure at the Court of the Tabernacle was open to the sky, the sanctuary was covered by overhead curtains laid on frames plated in gold. The sanctuary sat within the second square: the one to the west. Adaptations of the placement of enclosed rooms surrounded by outdoor yet defined spaces reappear in the Temple and at some later synagogues, including once more all those in Kerala.

Within the sanctuary was the Ark of the Covenant itself, crafted by Bezalel in the form of a box with the dimensions of two-and-a-half cubits in length, by one-and-a-half cubits in heights, by one-and-a-half cubits in width (Exodus 31:1-6, Exodus 32:1-5, and Exodus 37:1-9). It was constructed during the Israelites' journey in the desert and likely used until the destruction of the First Temple when it seems to have been lost. Throughout this long period, the Ark was the most important symbol of the Jewish faith. The Book of Exodus notes it was also fabricated out of acacia wood and was plated in pure gold. On the lower section of the box four gold rings were attached, through which two acacia wooden gold-leafed carrying poles were put. The family of Kehath, of the tribe of Levi, would carry the Ark on their shoulders using these poles. Covering the box was the *kapporet*, a pure gold veneered lid that was two-and-a-half by one-and-a-half cubits. Attached to the *kapporet* were two sculpted Cherubs, also gilded of pure gold. The two Cherubs faced one another, and their wings, which wrapped around their bodies, touched.



The Ark of the Covenant as an object would be later expressed in synagogues in the form of the ark, or *heckal*. Though the Ark of the Covenant, which contained as per the Hebrew Bible God's Ten Commandments recorded on the two stone tablets, and the ark, that housed the *Sefer Torah* written by human scribes on specially processed animal skin or parchment, are distinct from one another, what they have common is that both protected the most sacred Jewish objects within their respective religious places.<sup>10</sup> Kerala synagogues prominently feature a highly decorated *heckal* carved from locally available wood that is often partially leafed in gold or another precious metal, silver. While the design of the Kerala *heckal* was influenced by various sources to be discussed later in this thesis, some aesthetic connection between the Ark of the Covenant and the *heckalot* (plural of *heckal*) once found in Kerala synagogues deserves to be mentioned.

Hardly a permanent structure, the Court of the Tabernacle could be dismantled when needed and transported by the Levites from one site in the Sinai desert to the next. During the long conquest of Canaan, the Tabernacle was moved from place to place according to where the Israelites were encamped. Afterwards, once the Jewish tribes had claimed separate territories, according to the Torah it was brought to Shiloh, a central position within Ephraim, Joshua's tribe. The Court of the Tabernacle was the first sanctuary that the Israelites ever constructed, and therefore the forerunner of the Temple in Jerusalem and the ancestor, infinitely remote, of every synagogue ever built.

Some two hundred years would pass between the entry of the Israelites into Canaan with the Tabernacle and the rise of the Hebrew kingdom. This period, marked by turbulence that often included war, was when the Tabernacle was believed to have been captured by the Philistines. Eventually, under Kings David and Solomon during the tenth century BCE, the Jews were transformed from a fragmented tribal society into a powerful unified state governed from Jerusalem. In response to a human need to build bigger and better and to establishment something permanent in a place, the Temple was realized in Jerusalem atop Mount Moriah.

For more than three thousand years, the Temple, or *Beit ha-Mikdash* (House of Sanctuary or Sanctified House), was the center of Jewish religious life as well as its most sacred and important site. The Temple is also called by a variety of other names in the Hebrew Bible, such as *Beit Yahweh* (House of Yahweh) or simply *Beiti* (My house) or *Beitechah* (Your House). Built from about 957 and 950 BCE by King Solomon (ruled 970 – 931 BCE), the Temple was the site for Jewish sacrifice and oblations and the place for the Ark of the Covenant, which had been returned by the Philistines.<sup>11</sup> According to the Hebrew Bible, Solomon's father, King David (ruled 1008 – 970 BCE), had wanted to construct a great Temple to God a generation earlier as a permanent home for the Ark. An edict from God, however had forbade him from doing so since he was a man of battles and a shedder of blood (1 Chronicles 28:3). During his reign, however, David had begun to collect raw materials to be used in construction, from the wood and massive foundation stones, to the gold, silver, bronze and other metals (1 Chronicles 22:14, 1 Chronicles 29:4, and 2 Chronicles 3:1). King Solomon periodically sent ships to the port of Ophir in present-day Kerala to buy timber, almug (sandalwood), ivory, and other construction materials for the Temple as the Book of King records "the navy of Hiram...brought in from Ophir great plenty of almug tress...And king (Solomon) made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the King's house, harps also and psalteries for the singers: there came no such almug trees, nor were seen, until this day" (Segal 1993, 4). Thus began the tradition of appropriating considerable expense to important Jewish communal buildings. When Solomon became king following the death of his father, he was free to finally build a Temple.

In some respects Solomon's Temple (Figure 5) was a more substantial stone version of the Court of the Tabernacles in its layout, sequence of spaces, proportions, and orientation. As noted by various sources, what is known about the Temple comes through written descriptions and limited drawings and depictions (Kaploun 1973, de Breffny 1978, Krinsky 1985, Meek 1995, and Gruber 1999). The complex contained a

forecourt that was on direct axis with the building. Drawing from the Court of the Tabernacle, its entrance was at the latitudinal (short) end and framed between a pair of 18 cubit-high exterior columns called Boaz and Jachin. They are often identified as being made of brass, although some scholars claim bronze or copper was instead used (Meek 1995, 32). There is debate over their precedent and purpose, yet they are believed to have been freestanding elements and not engaged in a wall or supporting any load.<sup>12</sup> These two prominent architectural objects would come to have an influence on the design of synagogues, including every one in Kerala. Their relative placement as interior objects supporting the load of a gallery may be different to those at the Temple, but they are nevertheless commanding architectural elements that flank a main entrance.

Just past these markers flanking the entry was the Temple's first room, or *ulam*, measuring 20 cubits long by 10 cubits wide x 120 cubits high. This anteroom served to separate the sacred within from the profane without. Such a space not only exists in all Kerala synagogues, but it is usually in the same length to width (2:1) proportion. It is not, however, called the *ulam* but the *azara*. A thick wall containing only a pair of centered wooden doors divided the *ulam* from the next space of the Temple, the *heckal* or holy place/sanctuary. The last space was the Holy of Holies, or *devir*, a perfect cube measuring 20 cubits. This was where the Ark of the Convent was placed.<sup>13</sup> Since all the rooms of the Temple were contained within a higher volume, they were lit by clerestory windows. The incorporation of high windows in the double-height Kerala synagogue sanctuaries may not have directly been inspired the Temple, but they are nonetheless a similarly significant design feature within a large volume. Eventually in synagogues, the dedicated Holy of Holies space where the Temple's Ark of the Covenant had been kept was transformed into the ark and moved to the *heckal*. Around 620 BCE, Solomon's Temple, which has been infused with non-Jewish elements over the years, was renewed as the central sanctuary of Judaism when King Josiah (ruled c. 641 – 609 BCE)

suppressed impure and even pagan practices. At that time, the Ark of the Covenant that may have been moved to another site was returned to the Temple (Krinsky 1985, 12).

The Temple stood on a commanding site for more than 360 years, before being destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE.<sup>14</sup> It was then that many Jews were carried away to the Euphrates Valley, where they remained for a half century. At that time some 40,000 to 50,000 Jews were freed from Babylonian captivity and allowed to return to Judea.<sup>15</sup> Construction of a new and simpler Temple on the site of Solomon's Temple began in 537 BCE, although it was delayed for about seventeen years due to a dispute between its builder, the Jewish Prince Zerubbabel, and the Samaritans. It was completed in 516 BCE and formally dedicated the following year. According to the Book of Ezra in the Bible, its rebuilding was authorized by Cyrus the Great of Persia in 538 BCE, who conquered the city of Babylon, and ratified by Darius the Great. On their return to Jerusalem, the Jews promptly saw to the rebuilding of the Temple. Unlike the thorough specification of Solomon's Temple in the Hebrew Bible, Zerubbabel's Temple is not described there. What is known about it comes not from contemporary sources but from the first century CE Jewish historian Josephus<sup>16</sup>, and from the *Middoth* within the *Mishna*.<sup>17</sup>

Sources who have written about the Second Temple note that it was once more a rectangular enclosure where, within its space, a distinct procession was imparted. The entrance was at the short (west) side that was on direct axis with the holiest space at the far (east) end (Kaploun 1973, Krinsky 1985, Meek 1995, and Gruber 1999). This directionality was bequeathed to some future generations of synagogues, where one progressed straight ahead towards the ark. The same linear arrangement that existed in the Second Temple, a long, axial, and ceremonial one, became the formula for the synagogues of Kerala. The rectangle of the Second Temple was divided into an outer and inner court, and within the latter court the outer sanctuary and a Holy of Holies were found.

Although Jerusalem over the next five centuries fell to various outside powers, including the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE) and then, after his death, by Ptolemy I of the Ptolemaic dynasty (301 – 198 BCE) followed by the Seleucids, the Second Temple managed to survive. The darkest time during this five hundred year period was its desecration by under the Hellenistic King Antiochus IV Epiphanes beginning in 169 BCE, who attempted to convert the Temple to the worship of Zeus. Under the Jewish leader Judas Maccabaeus, the Greeks were defeated and the Temple was soon purified and re-consecrated. Until the first century BCE, the native Hasmonean dynasty founded by Judas controlled the territory and the Temple before it was overcome by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BCE. Pompey may have entered the Temple and penetrated the Holy of Holies, but he did not destroy the complex.

During the late first century BCE and into the early years of the Common Era, Judea became entangled in a civil war that ensued between rival factions in the Roman republic. Judea emerged as a Roman client-kingdom under leadership of Herod. He was the son of the chief minister of one of the last Hasmonean kings, by descent an Edomite, a member of the desert tribe conquered and converted to Judaism around 120 BCE. With the assumption of Herod (ruled 37 BCE – 4 CE), the five-hundred year old Temple was extensively enlarged, renovated, and upgraded beginning about 20 BCE (Figure 5). As someone without strong Jewish lineage, Herod sought to garner the confidence and support of the Jewish people by upgrading the Temple. His first action was doubling the size of the Temple Mount, which was surrounded by high supporting walls. A large complex made up of a series of indoor and outside spaces built from the finest materials by the most skilled local and foreign craftsmen available.

The Temple square was defined by columned porticos which were open to everyone, including non-Jews (Meek 1995, 38). Within the square was a large consecrated area (500 cubits x 500 cubits) only accessible to Jews. It is thus interesting that while non-Jews are generally permitted all the way into most synagogues anywhere

in the world, in Kerala non-Jews could only go so far. While gentiles have always been welcomed inside the Kerala synagogue, they were generally not permitted in the sanctuary during prayers but requested to remain in the *azara*, or anteroom. This restriction somewhat parallels the one at the ancient Temple. A succession of courts was contained within this consecrated area of the Temple, each of them of progressively increasing sanctity. First to come was the Court of the Women, with its equal sized chambers in the four corners. Up a flight of curved steps and through a gate was the Court of the Israelites, which was accessible to only male Jews. As with Orthodox synagogues around the world, the ones in Kerala always segregated the men from the women in separate areas during prayer. Beyond was the Court of the Priests. Here stood the altar for sacrificial offerings, from which laymen were restricted to enter. This exterior area was called the *azara*. Some centuries later, the term would be used in Kerala synagogue architecture although, yet since only the Temple contained a place for sacrifices, it was applied to a different space. All Kerala synagogues uniquely include an *azara*, which is a completely interior room. While synagogues around the world may contain anterooms, distinct to the ones in Kerala is such a space called by this Temple word.

According to sources who have written about Herod's Temple, the sanctuary, or Temple itself, was built of stone and featured a 100-cubit-wide façade articulated by giant Corinthian Orders (de Breffny 1978, Meek 1995, and Gruber 1999). Just inside was the vestibule, a space believed to be 70 cubits wide x 11 cubits deep that was decorated with a series of gold crowns suspended from the cedar wood ceiling joists. In all Kerala synagogues, this anteroom is called the *azara*. Past the vestibule was the *heckal*, a holy chamber with walls plated with gold that was flanked by a series of smaller religious spaces and a long passage. To the rear of the *heckal* was the altar of incense and the golden candelabrum. Adjacent to the *heckal* and separated merely by a curtain was the final space, the Holy of Holies. This was an empty place that only the high priest entered

on *Yom Kippur*, or the Day of Atonement, to offer incense. According to a Kerala Jewish legend, the local Jews of Parur were so rich and proud that they offered incense at an altar said to have had the same dimensions as the one at the ancient Temple. Since it is taboo to duplicate any one of its architectural features, and because the burning of incense at that altar was something only the high priest could do, for this act of hubris the Parur Jewish community in Kerala was stricken with the plague and their twelfth century synagogue fell into disuse (Yehudi 1989, Segal 1993, and Johnson 1995).

Soon after the death of Herod in 4 BCE, the Jewish Kingdom was demoted in status and its Roman procurator was an oppressive administrator. As a result, in the year 66 CE the Jews rose in revolt. It took four years, first under Vespasian and then his son Titus, for the Romans to suppress the Jews. According to Kerala narratives, some local Jews may have immigrated to the Malabar Coast of present-day Kerala during this period (Segal 1993, 6). Jerusalem was ultimately besieged, and after less than a century in use the Temple and most of the city were destroyed. All that survived was the Temple Mount and its outer high massive stone wall surrounding it, the most famous part is the *Kotel*, which is also most commonly known as the Western Wall, although in the recent past it was also referred to as the Wailing Wall and Wall of Tears. This small section of Wall is especially venerated by Jews, who make pilgrimages to the site.

In the tradition of the Herod's Temple, the extant Kerala synagogues were built as compounds with surrounding walls, although none of them are elevated on a podium or mount. There was, however, a consideration for elevation when Kerala Jews made sure that their synagogues were the tallest structures in their Jewish neighborhoods. Other literal if not lateral connections or bonds between the Court of the Tabernacle and/or the Temple in Jerusalem with the synagogues of Kerala should not be overlooked: the protective quality of the compound through the use of strong property walls, the latitudinal (short end) entry orientation, the incorporation of a prominent gatehouse or entry, the linear arrangement of the complex, the east-west design axis, the movement

from the profane on the outside to the sacred within, a hierarchy of spaces, and an inward focus of the spatial experiences. Others comparisons to be considered between the Temple and the synagogues of Kerala include the pair of flanking vertical members at a doorway placed there to recall the columns of Boaz and Joachim, an incorporation of forecourts and definition walls, the integration of fine woods and gilded surfaces, the celebration of fine and colorful draped fabrics, the design of important spaces in the 2:1 and 1:1 proportions, a progression of indoor and outdoor spaces, the inclusion of clerestory windows, the thick masonry load bearing walls, a variety of ceiling heights within enclosed rooms, the *azara* as a defined space, a separation of men and women within spaces, and the exclusion of non-Jews not the from entire building complex but from the most consecrated spaces.

These similarities in no way substantiate that Kerala Jews had witnessed the Temple first-hand before settling in the Malabar coastal region and then passed down their recollections to their synagogue-building ancestors. They should also not imply that there is a direct and factual link between these ancient Jewish structures and the synagogues in Kerala. Considerations of sensible and efficient planning rather than imitation could account for parallels. Yet as the most substantial and sacred Jewish architecture, the Tabernacle and Temple were apposite precedents in some form for the synagogues in Kerala whenever and however the inspiration was obtained.



### CHAPTER THREE EVOLUTION OF THE SYNAGOGUE

Since the Temple was never rebuilt, the *Kotel* (Western Wall) in Jeruslaem has remained the most sacred and important religious site to Jews. For more than nineteen hundred years, the Jews have been without a Temple, and over this long period the synagogue became what can be described as the outgrowth, and not a substitution, for this loss. The term synagogue, which does not appear in the Jewish Bible, is not Hebrew but rather one derived from the Greek word *synagein*, meaning “to bring together.” From its inception well before the demise of the Jewish Kingdom and the destruction of Herod’s Temple when Jews lived throughout the *oikoumene* (the inhabited Hellenistic and Roman worlds), it was essentially a creation of the people in response to their need for a local focus. During Jewish exile from Jerusalem by the Babylonians, it grew and developed in its function as a place where the sacred texts were stored and read, and the meaning enshrined in them explained and espoused. The synagogue was also where the people could gather on a more direct and intimate level to hear God’s word, study, and to pray. Over the same time, it matured as a communal center, not only of the religious, but also of the social, cultural, and sometimes even the commercial life of the Jewish people.

As written about in a variety of sources (de Breffney 1978, Krinsky 1985, Gruber 1990, and Gruber 1999), the synagogue has been in existence for over twenty three hundred years, and it can be traced back to the first and second centuries CE in Ostia outside of Rome and at Sardis in Asia Minor, to the very early centuries of the Common Era in the Galilee and other parts of current-day Israel including Jericho, Gamla, and Massada, to Dura-Europos in current day Syria to the second or third century CE, and even earlier to the Greek Island of Delos to the first century BCE. Dating back farther to the second and third century BCE are the synagogues that were built during the

Hellenistic Period in Egypt and Judea which, through modern archeological investigation, are the earliest Jewish houses of prayer discovered to date.<sup>18</sup> Persistent traditions, however, date the foundation of the synagogue to even earlier times to the days of the Babylonian Captivity (Folberg 1995, 161). Jews living there and in later scattered communities experienced the need for an accessible place of worship. As it was against Jewish custom to build other temples outside the one in Jerusalem, the alternative institution of the synagogue was initiated. After the last Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, even more synagogues in Judea appeared and, as Jews began to disperse in even greater numbers throughout the region and afar, the tradition of the Diaspora synagogue came into being. Among the Jewish houses of prayer eventually built world over were the ones in Kerala followed by those in other areas of India and in the immediate region of Pakistan and Mynamar.<sup>19</sup>

Based on physical evidence, the first synagogues were often small and simple rectangular buildings and consisted of only one room with benches for seating, often built in, along the perimeter walls. In this sense, although never fixed, the long, straight, and hard wooden seats normally without backs perennially lining the walls of the rectangular Kerala synagogues recall these earliest buildings. Although the physical synagogue was by no means derived from a single precedent or determining authority and hence one important reason why the building typology has generally never been defined in any exacting or recognizable ways the inspiration for some, albeit simplified and smaller in scale, was the bouleuterion, the Greek council chamber used for the assembly of people and for speeches to be heard. In Athens, it was a square building, with benches running along three walls, and the fourth walls was a partition dividing off the entry foyer. This type of plan is reflected in the archeological remains of those synagogues of the epoch that are mostly found in present-day Israel and adjoining lands (Meek 1995, 29). Another precedent for the synagogue was the basilica, the ancient Roman civic hall with origins from the second century BCE that was initially used as and judicial, government, and

communal building before it became a pattern for early Christian churches. Since some synagogues were erected under Roman authority, and the basilica with versatile space for gathering was a familiar typology, the overall building form itself became a logical precedent. The apse found on the interior of the basilica became a logical fixed space for the *Sefer Torah*. Since it was practice not to imitate the Temple in Jerusalem, the builders of early synagogues drew from known, popular, and flexible non-Jewish building typologies for their religious needs. Thus, at the onset of synagogue building, the Jews seemed to have rejected using the sacred Temple as an overt design precedent. Yet on the other hand some early synagogues were entered through courtyards, which could be interpreted as being a reference to the way the Temple was entered. Based on archeological evidence and recorded history, it is clear that early synagogues contained a variety of plans built contemporaneously rather than consecutively (Meek 1995, 30).

While it may have been the case that there were no specific synagogue rules or design parameters established early since Judaism once again does not adhere to a central authority or governing body, certain architectural elements or arrangements stuck over time. Some early synagogues, such as at Aegina, Stobi, and Ostia, all contained apses which were located at the eastern end of the buildings. The early synagogues in Palestine, unlike the early Christian churches or some early synagogues, did not contain an apse and did not focus the service on a pulpit within the building, but instead featured open windows or doors along this wall facing Jerusalem (Suknik 1979, 9). For such arrangements, the ark, a small portable chest in the tradition of the Ark of the Covenant, was temporarily brought into the synagogue during the service and then removed afterwards and stored by the Levites in a separate location.<sup>20</sup>

The Levites most likely set up the ark near the seat of the synagogue elder during services. As the ark grew in importance, it received a fixed position in a niche or engaged at the center of the Jerusalem-oriented wall. Before the ark was assigned a fixed place, congregants would enter the synagogue at the wall towards Jerusalem and then

turn around to pray. In the process, they would have a view through windows in the direction of the Temple however remote it was. To make room for the ark along the Jerusalem/Temple facing wall, the entrance doors of later synagogues were moved to the opposite end or side walls of the building, and the focal point of the space changed from being the open view in the direction of Jerusalem to the ark itself. In this sense, the synagogue shifted from an outward concept space with a view in theory out towards Jerusalem and the Temple to one with an inward emphasis or focus.

While always an enclosed space, it could be argued that the synagogue became more of a room at the point when the fixed ark became a symbol of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem – a significant architectural development and transformation. In prayer, Jews faced towards the site of the Temple in Jerusalem, but they no longer had a visual connect towards it, however far away. It was now obstructed physically by the ark. Even more so, since the Temple ritual emphasized sacrificial services performed out of doors by a priestly caste, the synagogue typically had always enclosed a congregation instead for prayer, so the new focus on the fixed ark within the space had made the building type even more internal. As with all synagogues built from this point around the world, the ones in Kerala followed this tradition, although they all have large windows often with transoms flanking the ark centered on the west wall towards Jerusalem. While they provide natural light and ventilation in the space, it could be argued that, in providing a considerable view outward, they combine the orientations of the pre- and post-fixed ark traditions.

Synagogue terminology did not find complete acceptance among all Jews. When it came to the *Aron Kodesh*, or Holy Ark, for example, the Ashkenazim, or Jews originating in western Germany and northern France and later from much of Eastern Europe, simplified the term to “ark.” *Tebah* in biblical Hebrew means “ark” and is a term that occurs in two places in the Bible, once to designate Noah’s ark and once for the floating cradle in which the infant Moses was hidden by his mother. It never refers to the

biblical Ark of the Covenant, which is called *aron ha-b'rit*. In time this changed, and the word came to mean “box” or “container.” As a result, the word *tebah* came to designate the pulpit in Sephardic (in both the liturgical and geographic sense) synagogues, i.e., the table or stand on the *bimah* or platform from which prayers are recited and the *Sefer Torah* is read. The ark, on the other hand, is called by Sephardic Jews the *heckal* from the Hebrew meaning “temple.” The *heckal*, or the main hall in the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, was used in the Talmud to mean the synagogue hall or sanctuary, but it eventually came to refer to the recess in which the ark stood.<sup>21</sup> In all Kerala synagogues, the *heckal* denotes the ark and not the synagogue hall/sanctuary, and the *tebah* refers to the freestanding, centralized reader’s table or pulpit and not to the ark. Various sources contribute this to the Sephardic tradition, and in fact many of the Jews of the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry of greater Kochi originated from Sephardic Europe in the early sixteenth century as a result of the Spanish and Portuguese expulsions. Yet other Jews in Kerala came from elsewhere at a much earlier time, so they would not have been a part of the European Sephardic tradition. While it is conceivable that Sephardic terminology may have permeated not just the Paradesi congregation but eventually all Kerala synagogues, it could have been the case that it had independently influenced the other Jewish communities in Kerala. While Sephardic terminology may have influenced the Kerala synagogue, the Sephardic tradition of organizing synagogue spaces did not, however. This important point will be addressed shortly in the thesis.

This incorporation of the names of spaces that once existed in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and applied in various forms to later synagogues can be seen throughout the Diaspora, including ones in Kerala. Yet the application of the ancient terminology is hardly uniform from one community to another throughout the world, and it is often not literal in its reference to the Temple. The results are ambiguous, assorted, and sometimes confusing. Since the synagogue was never intended to duplicate the Temple, any liberties taken in the application of names of spaces and architectural features could be

understandable and perhaps intentional or desirable. It was one thing, for example, to borrow in an evocative way from the Temple, yet quite different to use it in a replicate manner.

While a duplication of the Temple may have been taboo, some type of alternative, even contorted reference to it was often sought after. The mislabeling of terminology could also be accidental. The passage of time, blurring of historical reality, discombobulated narratives, differences in interpretation among Jewish subgroups, desire for a congregation to do their own thing, and the fact that Jewish communities may have been isolated from mainstream practice all may have accounted for this disparity. In Kerala, for example, each synagogue contains a room called the *azara*. This space gets its name from the ancient Temple, but while there it denoted a large exterior courtyard where the animal sacrifices took place, in Kerala's synagogues the *azara* is a fully enclosed anteroom or foyer. The interior space has always served a number of purposes, including an arrival space, place for the ritual washing of the hands, waiting area, acoustical and visual buffer zone, seating place for non-members, and spot for storing ritual furniture and objects, yet all of them had nothing to do with the actual activities once held in the Temple's *azara*. Sacrifices, after all, have never been held in the synagogue, although courtyards or enclosed or covered outdoor spaces (where the Temple sacrifices occurred) were incorporated in all Kerala synagogues. These exterior areas have always been an integral and memorable component of these Jewish compounds.

The question to be asked is why was not one of the exterior areas found in all Kerala synagogues called the *azara*? Perhaps it was intentional, yet perhaps not. The answer will likely never been known, but what is important is how the Jews of Kerala picked up on the ancient Jewish terminology of the Temple yet applied it to their own synagogues in a personal way. The synagogues of Kerala are architecturally unique in that no other Jewish houses of prayer anywhere in the world seem to have a space, indoor

or outdoor, called the *azara*. How this name came to be adapted to the entry halls of Kerala synagogues is something that is not likely to be explained, and one should be careful not to link the arrival of the Jews to the shores of the Malabar Coast to the time of the Temple when they were freshly aware of this courtyard area, yet the room is much apart of the architectural and cultural heritage of all synagogues in Kerala.

During the period of the ancient to early medieval synagogue, the ark became the major Jewish symbol. Captured in various visual mediums that have survived, these early arks or the fabric covering them were decorated with panels, menorahs, birds, grapevines, fruits, lions, ram horns, doves, eagles, storage vessels, candelabra, crowns, fountains, and other decorative flourishes. As the synagogue evolved over the years, it maintained this tradition of incorporating these motifs. These would sometimes be combined with representations of traditional implements of the Temple, particularly some type (often fluted or twisted) of columns reminiscent of the pillars of Boaz and Jachin.<sup>22</sup>

The *heckalot* of all Kerala synagogues are beautiful celebrations of many of these motifs. Fabricated out of local teak, they were intricately carved by local craftsmen with decorations referenced from the ancient days of synagogue and then in part gilded in the tradition of the Ark of the Covenant as well as painted. An examination of the Kerala synagogue *heckalot* reveals crowns, grapevines, fruit, menorahs, vines, flowers, and other historically popular non-figural forms. Components of these *heckalot* certainly originated from local sources, including the wood itself and craftsmen who fabricated them, but their overall aesthetic was derived from a variety of sources including, according to one art historian, from a seemingly unusual place: sixteenth-century Italy.

In her study of the Kerala synagogue *heckalot* in the early 1990s, the Israeli Orna Eliyahu-Oron asserts that they were periodically replaced when earlier ones had deteriorated or been damaged (Eliayhu-Oron 2004). Once a new *heckal* was fabricated and installed in a Kerala synagogue, the old one was not thrown away but, in the Jewish tradition, was stored in the *geniza*. This is a storeroom or depository located some place

within a synagogue where worn out and decommissioned religious as well as communal documents were placed until they could received a proper cemetery burial, it being forbidden to discard writings containing the name of God. In the Kerala synagogues, the attic above the sanctuary often functioned as the *geniza*, although other accessory spaces may have been used. In her visits to the Kerala synagogues, Eliyahu-Oron discovered some decommissioned *heckalot* stored in the *geniza* of a synagogue in Ernakulam that had never been buried. Eliyahu-Oron, in conjunction with her work with the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, analyzed these remains and came to the conclusion that their stylistic inspiration was from sixteenth-century Italian *heckalot*. In this process of rejuvenation, the aesthetic of the Kerala *heckalot* had evolved. Jews who had originated in Italy and settled in Kerala in the sixteenth century becoming connected to the Paradesi Synagogue had imported a *heckal* style which impacted local Jewish taste. As a result, the intricately and fluidly carved and painted wooden *heckalot* found in all Kerala synagogues after this period distinctly resemble those found in the Italian ghetto synagogues of, for example, Venice and Pesaro. If Eliyahu-Oron's scholarship is accurate, it provides another example of the many stylistic influences on Kerala synagogues.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the *parokhet*, or curtain, was an accessory of the Temple; it separated the *d'vir*, the Ark of the Covenant area, from the *heckal*, or main hall (II Chronicles 3:14). Since synagogues neither had the Ark of the Covenant nor needed a separate space dedicated to it, the building type evolved to include a single room, the prayer hall or sanctuary, featuring the *heckal*. Here *heckal* now refers to the ark where the *Sefer Torah* is stored and not the main hall used for prayer. Following a tradition found in many synagogues around the world, the ones in Kerala too had a *parokhet* covering its doors. At the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry, for example, various richly colored and embroidered *parokhetim* have draped over the *heckal* for many years (Figures 104 and 169). At the synagogue in Parur, it also had fabrics of various



sorts hung by rings and supported by an iron rod attached to the upper section above the door of the *heckal*. While hanging a fabric by rings and a rod is logical and timeless, it could have been done in this fashion as a reference to the same technique used in the ancient Court of the Tabernacle. The *parokhet* at a Kerala synagogue would be kept closed at most times and pulled aside by dragging the cloth along a rod whenever the doors of the *heckal* were opened during the religious service and the Torah scrolls acknowledged or removed. There it was considered a *mitzvah*, meaning a good deed, for members to not only donate the *parokhet* but to make a contribution to the synagogue in its honor. The funds would be used for maintenance and upkeep, and the *parokhet* was changed out periodically for different holiday services, special celebrations, and life-cycle events.

Over time, various liturgical, architectural, and artistic resolutions centered on the ark/*heckal* and *bimah/tebah* have been adopted, creating arrangements that are immediately recognizable and quintessentially Jewish. There are three dominating ark/*heckal* to *bimah/tebah* configurations in synagogues around the world, and typically one dictates the overall planning of the sanctuary, including those in Kerala. In Sephardic Jewish tradition, the *heckal* and *tebah* are often placed at opposite ends of the sanctuary, with a considerable gap between the two elements. This central space, frequently long and narrow, remains unoccupied except when the *Sefer Torah* is removed from the *heckal* and then carried in ceremonial fashion to the *tebah* where it is opened and then read. The congregation sits on both sides facing the axis between the *heckal* and *tebah*, and they direct their attention to one or the other at various times of the service. Because the *heckal* and *tebah* are so separated, people sitting close to one may see and hear the activity of the service quite well, but be far from the other when the focus shifts – a distinct disadvantage to those who are more inclined to get close to the action of the prayer service (Gruber 2003, 17).

In traditional Ashkenazic synagogues, what can be described as the freestanding or even floating or unanchored *bimah* (what the Sephardic Jews call the *tebah*) was more often centrally placed, allowing the congregation in more dynamic fashion to surround the reader of the *Sefer Torah*. Some Sephardic synagogues follow this second arrangement, particularly in smaller buildings where there was not adequate room to separate the *heckal* and *tebah* by much space, but this organization is of Ashkenazic origin. The freestanding placement of the *bimah*, where the activity of the service is most often found, can be said to permit the congregation to “embrace” and surround the proceedings (Gruber 2003, 17). These central arrangements also allows for more people to be close to the *bimah* and to best hear, see, smell, and even taste what is going on. Most sources on India Jewish history wrongly indicate that the synagogues in Kerala follow the Sephardic arrangement, yet they actually adhere to this traditional Ashkenazic plan. In Kerala synagogues, the *tebah* is always roughly in the center of the sanctuary, and male congregants gather around all sides of the object in unfixed seating. There is even a low bench literally surrounding the *tebah* where boys would often sit.

Lastly, in modern times, some Conservative and Reform Jews moved the *bimah* to the front of the congregation immediately adjacent to the ark, creating a raised platform or stage. Unlike the other arrangements, the members, sitting in long rows of parallel pews or in individual theatre seats affixed at a lower elevation, face in only one direction, generally towards Jerusalem, and a hierarchical layering of seating to *bimah* to ark developed. Those sitting closest to *bimah* may hear and see well, but the people sitting to the rear of the sanctuary generally do not have that advantage.

Other organizational arrangements for synagogues may exist, yet these are less common or even rare. In some Italian buildings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, the *bimah* is elevated almost an entire level above the sanctuary level, as is the case at the *Scuola Levantiana* Synagogue in Ancona, the *Scola Italiana* Synagogue in Venice, and the Sephardic Synagogue at Pesaro. Various synagogues built

in the Modern architectural style, and somewhat in the tradition of the theatre in the round, feature not a raised ark/*heckal* in the centuries-old Jewish tradition but one located within a sunken pit. An example of this arrangement is Mario Botta's Cymbalista Synagogue at Tel Aviv University of 1998. At the Reform synagogue, The Temple in Atlanta designed by Philip Trammel Shutze and dedicated in 1931, the *bimah* and ark are adjacent to one another, but the fully gold-leafed ark (in reference to the Ark of the Tabernacle) is placed several feet above the *bimah*. At the synagogues in Cavaillon and Carpentras France, the *bimah* is altogether elevated on a gallery. This is also the arrangement at synagogues in Basra and Istanbul, Turkey. In all Kerala synagogues, an identical arrangement can be found, but the important distinction here is that the gallery-level *tebah* is an altogether second one. The principal *tebah*, used for weekly prayer services, is found on the main level centrally placed amid the men's prayer area, and the second *tebah*, used for *Shabbat* and holiday services, exists at the gallery level overlooking the main sanctuary and adjacent to the women's seating area to the east. Much has been made of the two *tebot* as a unique feature to synagogue architecture around the world, and this important point will be returned to later in this thesis.

## **CHAPTER FOUR** WHO ARE THE JEWS OF INDIA?

India's history has long been marked not by a single, homogenous Jewish population but by a collection of distinct transient and permanent communities who arrived at different periods and dispersed themselves around the vast nation and subcontinent. The most well known are the Bene Israel, Baghdadis, and Cochinis (or from Kerala), but there is also the Mughal period Persian speaking community in the seventeenth century; the seasonal traders from the Middle and Near East beginning in ancient times and continuing into the medieval and early modern periods; as well as the Europeans who came in rounds ranging from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in the 1490s who passed through such places as Constantinople, today's Israel, and Aleppo; Italy in the sixteenth century; the long Portuguese/Dutch/French/British colonial period; or as late as the mid-twentieth century as refugees from Hitler's Europe. Not to be left out are the Bnei Menasse (also referred to as the Shinlung or Chin-Kuku-Mizo community) of India's northeastern hill states, an obscure faction believed by some to be descendents of the ancient Jewish tribes.<sup>23</sup> While not all groups, particularly the temporary ones, necessarily built synagogues, or several of those that were constructed no longer survive, the country is now home to thirty-five fully or marginally functioning, decommissioned, or closed synagogues found in New Delhi as well as the States of Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, Manipur, Mizoram, and Kerala (Figure 1).

What is clear about the Kerala Jewish community is that they were never a homogeneous and completely unified group. Its members did not arrive in India at the same time, from a single place, or under common conditions. While they may have shared the same religion, Kerala Jews were in cases socially and culturally diverse. Already of disparate backgrounds, they were profoundly affected by the Hindu caste

system in India. In the tradition of this ancient system from the Vedic period of classification and division, the original Jews who were of indeterminate origin are known as Black Jews, although they are today referred by the more politically sensitive label of Malabari Jews. They are distinguished from the White Jews, now called the Paradesi (meaning “foreigner” or “outsider”) Jews, who were later arrivals beginning in the sixteenth century from the Iberian Peninsula via intermediate stops in the Near and Middle East. They had been expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497 respectively when thousands of Jews has dispersed throughout the world. The Paradesi Jews were in time joined by successive waves of Jewish immigrants from Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and other European countries. At one time, the Paradesi Jews claimed that they were the original Kerala Jews, causing considerable friction among the two groups (Segal 1993, 22). A third group, the Brown Jews was comprised of *Meshuhrarim*, a Hebrew term of Freedmen, Jews who according to narratives are said to have once been slaves to Kerala Jews who converted then freed them. Jews of both the Paradesi and Malabari communities in fact once owned slaves. These classifications were so not much made on the physical appearance of the Jews but on origin or time of arrival, since not all Paradesi Jews appeared white, for example, and the Malabari Jews are no darker than the typical person from Kerala. Today it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish one sub-group from the other.

Much has been written about the distinctions between the two main subgroups of Kerala Jews (Walterstein 1988 and Schorsch 2004). For many years they did not mix socially, rarely if ever intermarried, pursued different professions, and prayed in separate synagogues. All Paradesi Jews were members of the Paradesi Synagogue in the Mattancherry area of Kochi, and this was the only synagogue ever built by them. Malabar Jews could pray in the Paradesi Synagogue and some of them did, but they were not eligible for membership. *Meshuhrarim* also attended, but they were not permitted inside the sanctuary or women’s seating area but rather sat during the service in adjacent

spaces: the men sat in the *azara*, and the women congregated in the upstairs space of the breezeway linking the gatehouse with the sanctuary.

In modern times, there were seven other synagogues in the five Jewish settlements in Kerala all belonging to the Malabari Jews, and everyone belonged to the synagogue of his or her forefathers (Johnson 1995, 32). In the event of intermarriage, which did not occur often, the couple and later their children would continue to pray in the paternal synagogue. In his book on synagogues, Geoffrey Wigoder writes that the synagogues of the Malabari Jews were reasonably affluent, although they lacked the fame and prestige of the Paradesi Synagogue (Wigoder 1986, 119). From today's perspective, since the Paradesi Synagogue has been the sole functioning and fully fitted out Jewish house of prayer in Kerala for many years, the only one ever belonging to the generally more affluent Paradesi Jews, a building prominently located on donated property by the Rajah of Cochin adjacent to his palace and Hindu temple, a major tourist site for years, and recipient of a World Monuments Fund restoration grant in 1998-99, it is easy to conclude that Wigoder's statement is true. The Paradesi Synagogue, after all, has long been the favored child of the family of Kerala synagogues and the center of considerable attention and fascination.

In fact, other Kerala synagogues, when they were in their prime, were larger and more elaborately detailed and spatially dramatic. Various communities of the Malabari Jews, by local standards, were prosperous, and they invested considerable resources into the building and maintenance of their synagogues. These synagogues were a source of great community pride. They were given confusing names: in both the Mattancherry and Ernakulam areas of Kochi there were the Tekkumbagam (meaning, in Malayalam "belonging to the southern side") and Kadavumbagam ("on the side of the river") synagogues, but most of the cases the names do not fit their locations. Based on narratives, the explanation for this is, however, simple: they were the names of synagogues in Cranganore that the Kerala Jews had built centuries earlier, and when they

were forced to abandon these buildings and shift to Kochi, they called their new places of worship by the names of their old synagogues.

According to Kerala Jewish narratives, Jews arrived on the shores of India and established themselves in the port town of Cranganore (also known by the names of Muziris, Kodungallur, or by the Kerala Jews as Shingly) just off the Arabian Sea (Figure 4). When they arrived is not known, but according to oral history around 1000 CE a leader of the Jewish community, Joseph Rabban, was provided wood free of cost by the local Chera Emperor Bhaskara Ravi Varma II for the building of a synagogue. As local narratives, in the twelfth century some Jews were forced out by the Moors, who saw them as menaces particularly in the lucrative pepper trade. The oral history also sometimes goes that in 1524 the Jews of Cranganore were severely persecuted during a second round of persecution by the Moors, who killed some Jews and drove others away (Salem 1929, 19 and Timberg 1986, 138). According to the more local narratives, not long afterwards, a third round of persecution against the small remaining Jewish community (including those that had returned in Cranganore) was carried out by the Portuguese, who had arrived in Cranganore in 1503, and by the 1520s they had established a stronghold there. On account of the Portuguese, 1565-6 marked the final exodus of the small remaining Jewish community from Cranganore (Salem 1929, 19 and Timberg 1986, 137).<sup>24</sup>

It is quite possible that the Kerala's Jews were forced out of Cranganore in multiple rounds; the community was first diminished as a result of the Moors, and then the Portuguese sealed the fate of the community some centuries later. In all cases, the displaced Jewish community resettled just to the south in nearby relatively secure Chendamangalam (or Chennamangalam) and Parur (or Paravoor) in Kerala's Ernakulam district and Mala in Thrissur district just to the north (Figures 2 and 4). At these locations, the Jews had sought protection under the tolerant Rajah of Cochin who ruled the territory. In time, they built synagogues in all three locations. While all three structures were repeatedly rebuilt over the years, today later generation buildings still

stand. Although they are no longer functioning houses of prayer since few if any Jews remain in these places, the buildings still stand. Kerala Jewish narrative also indicated that displaced Jews from Cranganore also came to settle in Kochi where in time synagogues were also built.<sup>25</sup>



## CHAPTER 5 AN OVERVIEW OF KERALA SYNAGOGUES

True to synagogues all around the world, those of India vary considerably in style, size, extent and quality of detail, materials, massing, and design language. Outside of Kerala, the majority of synagogues were built in a relatively short span from the 1840s through the 1930s during the height of the British Raj. Many were built in places which were being heavily expanded and shaped by British colonialism, including Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata. While this architectural period worldwide is known for some remarkable innovations in the use of new Industrial Revolution technologies and materials, it was the stylistic revivals permeating the building scene that constitute the majority of new construction during this time. This approach was applicable to much of the architecture built in India during the period of European colonialism, and it filtered in various ways down to the Jews, particularly the urban ones, when building synagogues.

As the case with some British colonial architecture, Jews living in India were sometimes more concerned about producing a building to suit their functional needs versus focusing on an appropriate or legitimate aesthetic. This was particularly the case with the Bene Israel community, who produced small to medium-sized synagogues during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early Bene Israel synagogues are a diverse collection of buildings that are difficult to label, describe, or categorize. They are hybrid buildings of the time that followed no pattern or model. Rarely did a Bene Israel synagogue incorporate an overtly Indian historic element in their synagogues. An exception is Mumbai's *Shaar Harahamim* (Gate of Mercy), the original smaller 1796 building (of an unknown design) completely rebuilt for a growing congregation in 1860 that included a Mughal-inspired *kanjura*, or crenellated roof balustrade with *jali*, or perforated screens fused onto a design containing some motifs that could be described as

Western, such as the pilaster design. As architectural trends changed in India and the Bene Israel community matured in Mumbai and Ahmedabad, a newer generation of synagogues responding to the spirit and fashion of the times were built, sometimes in a transitional traditional to modern aesthetic, and in other cases in the contemporary Art Deco style.

The balance of the extant synagogues built by the Jews outside of Kerala were examples of the process of passive Westernization in which they voluntarily turned to revivalist styles and tastes of leading English and European architects or to the contemporary colonial work in India when it came time to have their synagogues designed. This was particularly the case with the Baghdadi Jews who, as “white” (they were in fact of Near Eastern origin) non-Indians, sought a special status under the Raj. In the late eighteenth century, some Baghdadi Jews as traders arrived in central India from Syria, Iran, Iraq, and other West Asian countries on a seasonal or temporary basis. By the early nineteenth century, a permanent community of Baghdadi Jews had been established in Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata. Founded during the height of British colonialism in India, these Jews neither considered themselves as natives, nor did they wish to assimilate with or conform to the ways of the indigenous population, which to them included the Bene Israel community. Due to their religion, physical appearance, customs, and places of origin, they were in essence in-betweens – never British but not wanting to be Indian. Aware of the English air of superiority over the locals, most Baghdadi Jews stood firmly in the British camp, many remaining faithful to them to the end. Many, although not all, were faithful to the king and empire.

When the time came to begin erecting synagogues in the mid-1800s, the Baghdadi Jews built stately and expensive buildings with no intention of drawing from Indian or their own Near Eastern architectural precedents. Since the synagogues were a type of religious buildings and the British were Christian, Baghdadi synagogues resembled English city or country churches, such as *Ohel David* (Tent of David) of 1867 in Pune,

*Magen David* (Defender/Shield of David) of 1861 in Mumbai, or *Magen David* (Defender/Shield of David) of 1884 in Kolkata, all of which have Western details and soaring towers or spires. While in Europe and the United States certain revivalist styles, particularly the Gothic, had met the most resistance by the Jews, an understandable sentiment given its overwhelmingly Christian association, in India the European social and national context for the Moorish and Islamic revival was absent. The Gothic revival, reflected in public buildings of that period, was deemed suitable as a style of architecture distinct from that of the majority religion. Other Baghdadi synagogues, such as Mumbai's *Magen David* (Shield of David) of 1861 with its soaring central tower and stylized classical porch as well as *Kenneseth Eliayoo* (Gathering of Elijah) from 1884 also in Mumbai with its composite design of Neo-Palladian and Neo-Baroque influences, may have featured other styles, but they are equally European in aesthetic.

Some of India's synagogues are grand and of various historic Western styles, a handful nearly pure, the others more eclectic. A few include local or vernacular buildings traditions expressed through materials, building layout (such as deep front porches), architectural/structural details (including wide roof eaves to protect the building from the elements), or construction techniques. Many of the small to mid-sized synagogues, with architecture than cannot neatly be categorized, are unassuming buildings more international than conspicuously Indian in overall form and visual orientation. The exception to the normal synagogue pattern can be found in Kerala. There a mixture of vernacular and colonial construction and design influences were blended with both broadly Jewish and specifically Kerala Jewish liturgical requirements to create a distinctive way of building and organizing synagogues. For this reason, the synagogues of Kerala, although not resolved in a way that made them distinctly and wholly "Jewish" visually from the exterior, are unique in their architecture. In their interiors, the *tebot* and *heckalot* as quintessential Jewish elements may reveal that they synagogues, yet otherwise the space cannot be described as emphatically "Jewish." Rather, it is the

competition of multiple design and planning variables, ones to be discussed later in this thesis, that make the Kerala synagogues milestone Jewish houses of prayer. They represent a chapter in Judaic history when Jews freely built synagogues of their own volition by incorporating elements from a variety contemporary and historic local and outside influences fused with their particular religious and cultural needs.

The first synagogue built in Cochin State predates when the Kerala Jews resettled there en bloc in the sixteenth century as a result of Portuguese aggression. Dating from 1344 and attributed to Joseph Azar, it was located in a village called Kochangadi (near Mattancherry), now a part of the current city of Kochi.<sup>26</sup> Built most likely when the Jews abandoned an in or around Cranganore that was affected when the Perriyar River flooded, the synagogue is believed to have been razed by the army of Tipu Sultan during the Second Anglo-Mysore Wars of the early 1780s, and nothing of it remains except for an inscription stone (Figure 6).<sup>27</sup>

From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century small synagogues were built in a handful of places surrounding in within Kochi, including Palur, Tir Tur, Saudi (or Southi), Muttam, and Fort Cochin (Kochi). None of these building survive (Joshua 1988: 1). The seven extant synagogues belonging to the Kerala Jews can be found in Kochi proper, which is today made up of the mainland plus islands together having a city population of around 600,000, and in three northern towns of Parur (or Paravoor), Chendamangalam (or Chennamangalam), and Mala (2001 Census of India) (Figure 4).

In Kochi, a pair of synagogue buildings, the Paradesi and Kadavumbagam, front the ends of Jew Town's north-south running Synagogue Lane in the relatively quiet and pedestrian-friendly part of the city called Mattancherry.<sup>28</sup> The Paradesi Synagogue, the only synagogue built by the Paradesi Jewish community, remains operational, while the Kadavumbagam Synagogue closed in 1955 when the Malabari Jewish congregation immigrated en masse to Israel. Up until the mid-1950s, when the land was sold by its members just before immigrating to Israel, and the building eventually demolished in the

1960s for a private home some years later, there was also a third synagogue, the Tekkumbagam, located in between the two. It served the Malabari Jewish community. In this area of the greater Kochi, native and colonial architecture, both secular and religious, can be found amongst shaded lanes, an active street life, and public spaces. Two more Kerala synagogues, both closed due to the diminished Malabari Jewish community since the mid-1950s, are located in the crowded and bustling commercial district of Ernakulam across the harbor on the eastern mainland (Figure 4). One, the Kadavumbagam, is on Market Road just south of where it intersects with Jews (or Jew) Street and the other, the Tekkumbagam, just around the corner on Jews Street on the north side and mid-block before the intersection with Broadway.<sup>29</sup>

One synagogue stands in each of the outlying northern communities of Parur and Chendamangalam, both located in Kerala's Ernakulam district, and in Mala within the neighboring Thrissur district (Figures 2 and 4). These three houses of prayer, all realized by the Malabari Jewish community, are no longer functioning houses of prayer as a result of their respective congregations mass immigration to Israel beginning in 1955.

## **CHAPTER 6 KERALA AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL TRADITIONS**

Geographically Kerala is a narrow sliver of land along India's southwestern Malabar Coast extending some three hundred fifty miles bordered by the modern states of Karnataka to the north and Tamil Nadu to the south (Figure 1). Its width ranges from less than seven miles to a maximum of seventy miles, juxtaposed between the blue of the Arabian Sea to the west and the green of the towering Western Ghats to the east. While the forested walls of mountains along the state's eastern boundary range in elevation from 3,000 to 8,000 feet, flatlands and low hills between these peaks and the sea make up an area of very fertile land that for centuries has been heavily cultivated (Sarkar 1978, 14). In the uneven terrain of the region, human habitation is distributed densely in the fruitful western low-lands and sparsely towards the more harsh eastern highlands.

Kerala is renowned for its tropical landscape, miles of coastland, canopy of trees, year-round warm temperatures, and creeks and backwaters that traverse the terrain (Figures 8 - 15). Since the land experiences a particularly heavy annual south-west monsoon that is balanced by abundant sunshine during other periods, it is verdant and lush with vegetation and rich in animal life. The monsoon rains and other distinct climatic features of Kerala have also impacted the political, social, and architectural character of the state. Influenced by natural as well as cultural factors, much of the architecture of this region for centuries has been of a humble, sensitive, intimate scale, merging and in relative harmony with nature. Kerala has long been associated with the spice trade, fishing industry, maritime economy, history of overseas exchange, abundance of timber for building, tea and rubber plantations, rice fields, tolerant people, high educational standards, religious diversity, and innumerable rituals and customs.

This brief description of Kerala would remain incomplete without mentioning a

local legend of its creation, which believes that the land of Kerala itself was a gift of the Arabian Sea to Parasurama, one of the *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu. Myth has it that Parasurama hurled his *parasu*, or axe from Gokarnam, a coastal settlement of Karnataka State to Kanyakumari, another coastal enclave in Tamil Nadu. Where the axe struck, water along the two points receded. This revealed a land formation which came to be Kerala (Sakar 1978, 15). As it happens, the land of Kerala did arise originally from the sea as a result of volcanic activity or seismological factors (Menon 1979, 9).

From a broad range of physical and climatic elements specific to the land of Kerala then coupled with religious, social, economic, and political considerations, a mode of vernacular architectural expression emerged in Kerala. This can be described as an architecture produced not necessarily by architects but by well-seasoned native craftsmen trained in the use of regional materials and construction techniques to confront local cultural and environmental conditions. If slow to change, it is not a style frozen in time and circumstance but shows gradual and methodical evolution influenced by ever changing situations. It is also an architecture influenced at times by contemporary monumental or “high” forms and techniques afforded to the most important buildings used for religious monuments or by the ruling elite. Details and components of these fancier buildings were in turn simplified or streamlined and applied to the more modest work, including Kerala synagogues. The roots of this vernacular architecture are centuries old, planted by the earliest settlers to the land. It grew out of its surroundings, molded by an assortment of human factors, and adapting to the climate, available natural resources, and topography of the area. This array of variables directed construction techniques, form-giving, and spatial planning.

Initially the shafts of indigenous and abundant coconut trees were sliced into long planks to be used for building small structures, and its strong branches, the leaf petioles, were used for roofing (Figure 20). The roof framing would be set on walls made either of wood, thatching, coconut frond sections made by folding a frond and interweaving the

leaflets of one side with those of the other (Figure 21). In other cases, mud walls were used. Even today, this uncomplicated yet effective type of construction continues to be used in small applications. In time, more durable materials began to be incorporated. Along the Malabar Coast where there is heavy seasonal rainfall, an iron-rich hardpan is found beneath the surface of the rich earth. What forms naturally in great abundance is laterite, a variegated reddish-brown soft stone found in modern-day Kerala and in parts of neighboring Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Goa States (Figures 18 and 19).<sup>30</sup>

Laterite, known locally as *vettukallu*, is obtained in the lowlands and midlands regions of the state from hundred of quarries where the stone is cut and dressed. A Scotsman, Dr. Francis Buchanan, conducted studies in and around the region of Angadipuram in the early nineteenth century, and he is the one who named the porous rock laterite from the Latin term *lateritis*, which means “brick stone.” Technically there are two kinds of laterite: the vesicular variety that is formed by the decomposition of gneiss in situ and the pellety type that is a detrital rock, meaning one that is produced by leeching, disintegration, or wearing away. The stone is found under a fairly shallow layering of rich soil, as massive outcrops without vegetation, and along with huge boulders of granite and gneiss (Bernier 1982, 49).

When moist, the soft laterite can be easily cut with a spade into regular-size bricks or small blocks. Upon exposure to air, the laterite gradually hardens similar to Italian *tufa* as the moisture between the flat clay particles evaporates and the larger iron salts lock into a rigid lattice structure and become resistant to atmosphere conditions (Bernier 1982, 50). Although there is also a tradition of baked clay bricks in various shapes and forms in Kerala, raw laterite has long been the principal material in local construction for centuries if not millennia. Over the years, it has ably served a gamut of secular and religious project types.<sup>31</sup> According to Kerala architectural historian H. Sarkar, the tradition of employing the stone in Kerala dates back to the megalithic period of about 200 BCE – 100 CE (Sarkar 1983, 273).



Hard stone such as granite, not nearly as plentiful to the area and far more difficult to quarry, was restricted to the foundation, base, and courtyard surfaces, even in important buildings such as at palaces and large Hindu temples. In other applications, the laterite was the material of choice for building purposes. More common houses, as an example, were typically built atop a foundation of laterite stone, and the stone could be continued for the load bearing walls. Commercial and civic structures throughout Kerala used laterite liberally. So too were the region's Hindu and Jain temples, Syrian and Catholic churches, mosques, and the synagogues constructed out of laterite. Even today, with the advent of modern materials beginning in the twentieth century, laterite remains a popular and practical construction material.

The laterite is cut into fairly uniform albeit still relatively rough-faced brick sizes or slightly larger block. It being a textured stone that is also very porous, laterite cannot be smoothed or polished. Although its thick wall application can withstand compressive loads, another limitation of laterite is that it is crumbly and unstable with very little tensile strength, yet the stone is abundantly available, inexpensive, easy to handle, and rather versatile. In some cases, the laterite blocks were simply piled on atop one another without mortar, yet laterite walls have long been bonded in mortars of shell lime, which have been the classic binding material used in traditional buildings in Kerala (Figures 19 and 25). Lime mortar can be improved in strength and performance by admixtures of vegetable juices. The combination of the readily available and easy to obtain laterite stone with the inexpensive and simple lime mortar created for an ideal load bearing wall. The result is massive and solid construction at a relatively low cost (Bernier 1982, 50).

The surfaces of the thick laterite walls were either left raw, covered in mud, or more frequently plastered with chunam, a polished lime plaster material very common to Kerala and others parts of India (Figure 26).<sup>32</sup> With the advent of European colonialism, the applications of chunam evolved over time. The chunam was sometimes mixed with locally grown jaggery, a product of the sugar cane plant, to make the material stronger

and more workable. The process of whitewashing involves the lime combined with a blue powder. The finished product is naturally white, although it can be treated with natural admixtures or a washable distemper to color it. In a traditional application, it is this added ingredient to the chunam and not paint applied afterwards that gives it its proper aesthetic (Josephai 2009). Since laterite does not take detailed or intricate carving well, in most cases, the chunam walls were flat as sculpting or projecting of the stone was confined mainly to heavy molded horizontal bands or coursings at the top of plinths/bases, along floor lines, or framed openings (Figure 52). Drawing from Portuguese colonial architecture beginning in the sixteenth century, decorative flourishes were expressed in the chunam walls in the form of fan-like alettes with radiating striations, engaged pilasters, circular roof vents, rope patterns, or scrolls in relief (Pereira 2002, 22) (Figures 52 – 54). Compared to the more “high” examples of Portuguese colonial architecture in Kerala and neighboring Goa, the details and ornamentation in vernacular building were simplified (such as at the Kerala synagogues), and their applications were limited.

With the laterite stone, used regularly for load-bearing walls, wood was introduced above for roof framing. While wood was used centuries ago in the construction of important buildings throughout India, with advancements in technique and technology it was in many cases long ago usurped by stone. The more permanent material thus became the principal material for creating art and architecture. Kerala has always been the exception for continuing the use of wood. While there are stone buildings in Kerala, the wood was never relegated to lesser applications. Even Tamil Nadu that neighbors Kerala to the east and Karnataka to the north have developed architecture fabricated mostly out of stone. Scholars are still not clear why this part of the subcontinent stands alone in its approach to design and building construction, yet ultimately Kerala’s natural reserve of forest (Figures 16 and 17) provided ample wood to

build timber structures there were to dominate methods of construction well into the modern period.

All of Kerala is rich in timber, with the southern part of the state alone having six hundred varieties of trees. This abundance of wood is not only used for building purposes and a variety of other applications in Kerala, but it has been for many years one of the state's major exports. Among the most popular for wood construction are teak, rosewood, jack wood, mahogany, redwood, cedar, coral wood, and ebony. Teak, for example is not only resistant to rot, making it especially suitable to ship building as well as to construction in the rainy climate of Kerala, but it can be beautifully carved (Menon 1979, 22). The teak *heckalot* of all Kerala synagogues are a clear expression of this craft. This abundance of local timber coupled with a centuries-old tradition of woodworking stemming from a boat-building seafaring economy (Figure 15) inspired well-crafted and structurally sound timber roof structures. Accurate joinery, artful assembly, and delicate carving of wood work for various structural and decorative architectural components are the unique characteristics of Kerala architecture. The profile of many roofs of traditional Kerala structures in fact resembles an upturned hull of a *vallum*, or locally crafted fishing boat (Figure 24).

From Kerala's tremendous variety of trees, timber known to be strong was used for the main rafters whereas softer wood more commonly used for doors, carved panels, millwork, trim pieces, and accessory objects. Drawing from Portuguese colonial work built in Kerala beginning in the sixteenth century notable for its wooden balustrades, the Portuguese preferred using iron but because it was rare to Kerala substituted it for abundant wood, the vernacular traditions of the Malabar Coast evolved to include similar, albeit simplified, lathe-turned elements. The easy workability of wood allowed for the intricate design details that appear along the beams and rafters particularly at their ends. This was done in part to compensate for mostly flat and unadorned chunam over latrerite walls. Carvings covered many timber members of the architecture, including beams, roof

rafters, supporting brackets, and columns with their capitals. *Jali*, or wooden lattice and perforated panels at hip gable/gablet roof ends, as screens between spaces, and along wall openings were commonly used for both ornamentation and ventilation. Some delicately carved wooden trim pieces were included in the form of fascia boards, running along the raking cornice of gable roofs as adornment, or at the attic level of the gablet ends (Figures 27 - 36). The end opening allows air to circulate within the attic or open roof spaces in Kerala's hot tropical region; the projecting roof deflects the annual torrential monsoons. Along with these practical applications, the exposed surfaces of the timber construction may have been decorated and carved. Here form and function were in balance. Colored panels, made of vegetable dyes painted over wet polished lime surfaces or onto planes of chiseled wood, were also featured as decoration. In the Hindu tradition, later murals in wood became part of the decoration apart from the myths that were portrayed. In the Kerala synagogue application, the teak used for the intricately carved *heckalot* was in turn normally gilded and further decorated with natural paints. In other limited cases, shaped and carved friezes at the exterior breezeway or interior balcony and as over panels at entry doors decorated the other simple interiors of Kerala synagogues (Figure 131).

As a Kerala master carpenter began his work, whether for a secular building such as a residence or at a Hindu temple or even synagogue, according to local tradition he followed numerous guidelines for the selection of wood. Although the principles of *Thachu Sashtira*, or science of architecture and construction, had existed in Kerala during the medieval period, foremost among the treatises is the *Silparatna* of Sri Kumara, composed in the sixteenth century and the *Tantrasamuchaya*, *Vastuvidya*, and *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Bernier 1982, 52).<sup>33</sup> According to these works, trees needed to be rejected if they had been attacked by insects or had creepers or bear thorns. Lumber should not be taken from trees that are used for worship by Brahmans, roosted in by animals and birds, always bear fruit, or found in temple precincts. Also to be avoided are

trees that are standing at roadsides or located in cremation *ghat* areas. Any tree that is curved, broken, dry, occupied by serpents or goblins, oozing water, producing milky sap, uprooted by wind, or damaged by fire would also be deemed inappropriate for building purposes. Similarly, trees have always been unacceptable if they had been pierced by the tusks of elephants or struck by lightning. They should not be taken from temple sites or locations that are meeting places of rivers with the sea. Trees growing in lakes or wells are also to be rejected. In addition, according to the architectural historian Ronald Bernier, many species are recognized as obstacles to happiness if they are used to build houses (Bernier 1982, 52).<sup>34</sup>

With the evolution of foundations, walls, and framing systems in Kerala's vernacular architecture came a progression of roofing materials. For centuries roof tiles over the timber framing were sparingly used, incorporated only into palaces or the most important Hindu temples. Only after the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century did baked clay, as a result of a new manufacturing industry driven by style and demand, increasingly replace thatching as a finished roofing material (Figures 20; 22 - 24). Although it is commonly albeit inaccurately said that the Portuguese or Christian missionaries introduced tile-making to Kerala in the sixteenth century, they were simply instrumental in developing mass production of tiles at low cost, and they popularized and refined their use. While thatch may have been the most typical roofing material in early time in Kerala, and laterite has long been the most popular one for walls, brick and tile came to be considered as important to domestic and religious architecture in Kerala. While clay was frequently used for making roof tiles, it was far less commonly applied to the production of bricks because of the easy availability of laterite.

The *Silparatna* is specific in defining four kinds of earth or clay used for roof tiles and bricks. Ronald Bernier lists them as *cikkana* which is viscous by nature, red and chalky *pandara*, *salona* which is saline, and reddish *tamraphulla* which is the best for making bricks and tiles since it lacks impurities and contains fine sands but no gravel. It

is processed by being placed in a special pit that is lined with bricks or stones, and water is poured over it. Then it is made into a paste by being repeatedly stepped on. After all the water has soaked into the clay, it is sprinkled with a decoction that is made from the bark of trees with milky sap, usually fig.<sup>35</sup> When this has been absorbed, the clay is sprinkled with a second decoction that is made from the sirisa tree and it is also absorbed. A third such substance may also be added, this made from triphala. A period of thirty days is normally needed between each sprinkling for a total of ninety days. The process is the same for both brick and tile manufacture (Bernier 1982, 54).

Before the molded tile appeared in India, the so-called “old pan” tile was used. The classification of tiles was rather complex, and in fact, according to Ronald Bernier’s study, there are eleven types of tiles differentiated, mainly according to their measurements in *angulas* and *yavas*.<sup>36</sup> Eleven different mold types all made of wood have been used to make the tile. The plank surfaces of the molds are powdered with ashes and then clay is spread inside the mold and pressed to uniform thickness to make a tile. A thick edging at the tip of the tile is shaped so that the tile can be suspended from or hooked onto the wooden rafters as a roof covering. In more recent years, clay tiles began featuring holes to allow them to be nailed to the roof framing strips. The tip, base, and sides of the clay tiles are cut with knives or bamboo tools to make them even and uniform. After the clay dries, the tile is removed from the mold and given final touches such as inward or outward curves so that it will interlock with other tiles. The usual product is rectangular and interlocking both some buildings, both early and modern, are covered with a fish scale kind of pattern that results from the use of so-called “Dutch tiles,” a product perfected during the Dutch colonial period, that are small, flat, and circular in shape. Special tiles are formed for along the roof ridge and ends (Bernier 1982, 54).

Like bricks, tiles need to be dried, but in indirect sunlight. They are then baked in a kiln on an auspicious day that is determined by astrological calculation. Alternatively,

a pyre may be made for baking tiles. This is done as straw, chaff, grain, and water are put over the tile on a bed or strew atop dry tamarind branches spread on the ground. Tiles are placed in water for aging, just like bricks after they are baked. They are hard, impervious to water, bright red-orange to red-brown in color, relatively thin and lightweight, and durable albeit breakable. The Portuguese so successfully developed a system of mass production of tiles at low cost that it became rare to find temples or substantial houses being covered with thatch. The roofs did, however, retain the shape and proportion of thatch construction to the present day (Figures 22 - 24). In more recent years, the “old pan” clay tiles were replaced by “mangalori” (named after the city in southern Karnataka long associated with clay tile production) pattern and flat tiles, and the simple rafter and ridge beam roof frame of traditional type was gradually changed to King post and Queen post trusses, making it possible to span areas for larger architecture and yet support heavy clay tile roofs. Since clay roof tiles have a limited longevity, today the overwhelming majority of clay roof tiles found on every roof surface of Kerala synagogue is not of the older handmade variety but either factory-made mangalori or locally molded imitations. They are set on wooden furring strips or lathes that are laid on the roof’s wood framing system. In some cases the Kerala synagogues feature the simple rafter and ridge beam system, while in other instances the King post and Queen post trusses are used.

As previously mentioned, granite is a material available in Kerala, yet in more limited supply. Because of this, the hard stone was sparingly used in only the most prominent locations or applications, such as at palaces, important religious buildings, and defensive structures. Where the architecture needed to be most durable and strong, granite was used extensively for foundation and plinth, where it followed the great tradition of hard stone plinth design found throughout other parts of India. Floors of buildings and courtyards were also largely made of this hard stone. The venerable granite came to represent something special, and with this it was vested with symbolic

and ritual meaning. One way how this was manifested can be seen at some Kerala Hindu temples (Figure 40). Rather than any fixed pattern, the granite is loosely or informally arranged on the floor planes. In the inner court of various Kerala Hindu temples there is usually a set of markers that devotees follow to go around the *srikovil*, or the sanctum sanctorum where the idol of the deity in a Hindu temple is installed. These markings are a set of stone pieces known as *bali-peethas*, and diagrams were made to reference the positions of *debas* (gods of the Hindu pantheon) in relation to the main idol (Bernier 1982, 62).

As a particularly hard stone, granite was also considered an impermeable material easy to be kept clean and free of impurities at Hindu temples. In the Hindu religion, purity is revered. It is achieved in a variety of ways, including through frequent ritual baths, a vegetarian diet that is correctly prepared, fresh flowers, offerings that are washed and properly presented, refraining from the use of the left hand, and the removal of one's shoes in houses and temples. Drawing from this tradition of emphasizing purity, which the Jews obtain through their own version of ritual bathing, a diet and food preparation, washing of the hands, and other complicated ancient religious practices, the walled courtyard of the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry is also partially paved in granite as is the covered front porch at the synagogue in Chendamangalam and some of the unenclosed yet covered spaces at Parur Synagogue.

While at the Kerala synagogues specific symbolic meaning has neither been applied to the individual stone pavers nor have markings ever been set in a distinct path sequence in the Hindu temple tradition, the fact that the valuable stone was used still has great significance. The use of granite may speak to the community's prosperity and willingness to invest considerable funds in their religious architecture but, more importantly according to the now deceased Paradesi Jew A. B. Salem, it confirmed a Kerala Hindu temple influence on local synagogue architecture (Salem 1929, 28). While Salem was not correct for stating that the entire courtyard of the synagogue is paved with



granite as only some areas are, the use of the granite does seem to give nod to Hindu theories and traditions that the hard stone is one that cannot easily be polluted in this Jewish application. Since the act of moving from the profane on the outside world to the sacred within the synagogue is an important component of the synagogue experience as is the attainment of purity, the granite pavers could be said to have been incorporated to maintain and reinforce this Hindu-turned-Indian-turned Jewish building tradition. And at the Paradesi Synagogue, it was the tradition for hired groundskeepers to regularly wash down its courtyard floor.

The Kerala vernacular style developed its individuality by not only tapping local resources such as laterite, timber, and clay, but exploiting them to respond to the needs of a local environment (Figures 27 - 36). The extremely heavy seasonal rainfalls of the Malabar Coast, for example, called for a steeply pitched waterproof roof to carry water clear of the inhabited area, while extended eaves protected the wall fabric from water damage. During Kerala's dry and hot season, a large, high and well ventilated roof space continuous with the inhabited area was practical. This was expressed through such things as gablet (hip gable) end, open eaves, and large circular vents. These architectural features that were incorporated for cooling purposes yet, extending beyond the practical, they were also often carved or decorated.

The evolution of the simple plan and shapes in vernacular Kerala architecture began with simple enclosures and arrangement of indoor and outdoor space and, over a period of time, got refined in detail and scale. They did however follow a careful set of measurements that have been laid out in treatises responding to *Thachu Sashtra*, or Kerala's ancient building code. Their units of measurements are related to parts of the human body, for instance the distance between the top of the middle finger to the tip of the elbow. One sees buildings being made based on the human body to create a form that is in balance with man. The slope of the roofs is usually constant even though the size and plan shapes are different. This seems to create a pleasing line for the eye. Palaces

and wooden houses also followed the policy of keeping the slopes at a uniform angle. More important is that the roof form creates different compositions and is able to interact visually with the sky and surroundings landscape. While it remains unclear on whether such guidelines were consciously and intentionally applied to synagogue design in Kerala, they were, in the process of being built by Hindu craftsmen, nevertheless often built by inspired by local buildings traditions that had already factored into these dimensional parameters based on the human body.

As the major religion in Kerala, Hinduism affected the region in innumerable ways. One obvious and very appropriate example of this in the context of local synagogue architecture was the Hindu temple complex (Figures 37 - 45). Although there are some Hindu temples in Kerala that follow the South India Dravidian model: relatively compact, square in plan, tower-like, and built of hard stone, laterite, and sometimes brick. Many, however, broke from this tradition in a way unique to Kerala through their significant use of wood. Exploiting a wealth of local timber, a vernacular style evolved, its oldest extant examples dating from the late medieval period. Quite unlike those found elsewhere in India, they consist of a group of more low-rise, visually weighted to the ground, sometimes tiered, and more sprawling buildings with mostly gabled or hip gabled clay tiled (or sometimes copper) roofs developed that recall the vernacular designs of Kerala house forms. These buildings are set in a rectangular compound surrounded by various wall designs and entered through low *gopura* (gateways) at some or all of the cardinal points (Figures 38 and 44). The structures within the temple complex are not only square or rectangular but also circular and even apsidal and elliptical.

The dominance of the stand alone circular shrine with its conical roofs, called in various incarnations a *ghata-prasada*, *vritta*, or *padma-prasada* and not seen elsewhere in India, is a unique feature of the Hindu temple architecture of Kerala (Figure 66). The popularity of the circular shape in these local temples likely infiltrated the Kerala

synagogues not so much in their overall building form but in their *tebot* centered within the sanctuaries. While all synagogues around the world contain this important liturgical feature, they are very rarely circular, and any one that is in this shape can be with considered an anomaly (Figures 61 - 63). The next chapter of this thesis will delve more into the connection between the circular form in Kerala Hindu temple architecture and the *tebot* found in the synagogues.

The buildings within the Kerala Hindu temple compound normally rise from a stone base, but often the greater structural part is in timber (Figure 39). Some temples have walls made of laterite or granite, but the use of wood is uniquely prevalent in Kerala. The foundation stonework is simply molded and external timber elements are fairly plain, although the struts can be more elaborately carved while lotus and geometric forms may decorate the flat surfaces, often as *jali*. Rectangular buildings in temples are characterized by an extension of the ridge so that the gablets at both ends extend out over the hipped roof below, a distinct Malabar design element (Bernier 1982, 72) (Figure 41). In these buildings, an extraordinarily rich wood-carving tradition reveals itself that is a quality also seen in Kerala's synagogues.

In Kerala Hindu temples, coffered ceiling panels are frequently incised with relief figures, lotus flowers, or swirling forms. Drawing from this tradition, more simple ones in Kerala's synagogues tend to feature only flat grid lines forming square panels inset with a plain wood molding and a lotus flower. In the case of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Kochi's Jew Town in Mattancherry, however, the ceiling, with its coffered design that is elaborately carved, approached those in the fanciest Hindu temples (Figure 176). In Hindu temples of Kerala, supporting columns are sometimes made of carved stone, yet others are lathe-turned wood to produce annular beading of contrasting sizes, often finished with colored lacquer (Figure 40). In synagogues, similar columns can be found inside the sanctuary and supporting the gallery (Figure 100). These supports, flanking the path from the entry doors, are also lathe-turned wood to produce annular

beading of contrasting sizes. They can likewise be finished colored lacquer, or they can be polished brass. So while Jewish sources often parallel the columns of Boaz and Jachin at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem with the pair found in all Kerala synagogues, they could as easily be linked to the ones found in many local Hindu temples. The brass ones of some Kerala synagogues also have a strong aesthetic connection to the tall and shapely polished brass fixtures used for burning incense as per the general Indian tradition.

The Kerala Hindu temple influence on the synagogues of the state can be substantially explained by the fact that the construction work was done by the same local Hindu craftsmen who were building the temples. In the same way that Kerala synagogues were affected by the vernacular traditions of the region, so too were mosques. A few vernacular examples of mosques remain in Kerala. These can be seen at Cranganore (Figure 51), Kollampalli, Kuttichirapalli and Muchchandipalli in Kozhikode, near Kollam, Panthalayani near Koilandy, Odatheelpalli in Tellicherry, Thanur, Ponnani and Kasargode (Bernier 1982, 112). Raised on a high plinth, they adapted vernacular forms and applied them to Islamic use. The Arabic tradition of simplicity of plan had perhaps combined itself with the indigenous construction techniques in Kerala giving rise to the unique style of mosque architecture not found anywhere else in the world. In contrast, the Indo-Islamic architecture of central and northern India drew its inspiration mostly from the Persian and sometimes from the Ottoman traditions and created highly an ornamental style elsewhere in India.

Unlike most mosques elsewhere, but like Hindu temples, churches, and synagogues, the focus of these Islamic buildings in Kerala is along its long axis. Vernacular mosques in Kerala are unusual lacking domes or any form of minaret. They are whitewashed chunam over laterite buildings with their walls punctuated by many openings. The coffered ceilings, richly carved with Hindu-style plant motifs, are supported by large wooden pillars. In recent decades, the more simple or reserved architectural features of the old mosques have been replaced by arcuated forms, domes,

and minarets that are seen as more visible symbols of Islamic culture. With the explosion of the Islamic population in Kerala in recent decades, many new mosques have been built that altogether askew the vernacular traditions of Kerala in favor of ones that blend in these more universally recognized Islamic features, yet often using modern materials (such as concrete) and techniques to express them. Since the majority of Kerala's Jews immigrated to Israel beginning in the mid-1950s, there was no similar opportunity to "update" the designs of the vernacular synagogues.

Similar to the ways Kerala's vernacular building traditions shaped many of its religious buildings, some of the church took on these characteristics (Figures 47 - 50). As one example, in Changacherry, a town located between Kochi in central Kerala and Thiruvananthapuram to the far south, is the St. Mary Syro Malabar Catholic Church. While the cathedral is a grand building that blended components of the Kerala vernacular with more "high" or flamboyant Portuguese colonial elements (Figure 48), adjacent to it is the older *kochoo palli*, or minor church (Figure 47). With its gabled covered porch, followed by the taller gabled sanctuary in the middle, and the even taller hipped rectory to the rear, it is a simpler structure built of laterite veneered in whitewashed chunam and a wood-framed roof covered in clay tiles. Here there is limited detail and ornament applied to the exterior walls, although more so than at the typical Kerala synagogue. In Kerala Syrian Church fashion, the whitewashed walls of the rectory feature small animal figures in relief. Aesthetically, the interior of small church is a close cousin to the Kerala synagogues. Although it does not have an anteroom after the porch, the rectangular church is also approached along the latitudinal (short) end. In church tradition, the entry faces west, while at Kerala's synagogues it is at the east since one enters facing Jerusalem to the west. After passing through the deep porch, the sanctuary building is entered under a balcony paneled in intricately carved wood that is now painted. A ladder in the corner leads up to the second floor, which overlooks the sanctuary. This was used as overflow space. There is no pair of columns to hold up the gallery or frame the view into the

sanctuary as with the local synagogue formula, yet just ahead is the main prayer space. There are no windows, only sides doors to allow in light and air, and no finished ceiling as the rafters and ceiling tiles are exposed, but the sanctuary terminates with the altar which akin to the *heckal* at the synagogue.

Particular to Kerala synagogues is their planning. Drawing from the centuries-old Kerala Hindu temple and domestic architectural pattern of sprawling (versus clustered) arrangements of buildings featuring courtyards and covered yet unenclosed spaces – ones often sited and designed by the *stapathi*, or master builder, who synthesized the practical and technical matters with astrological and mystical sciences – the synagogues are usually not single buildings but compounds of successive indoor and outside spaces surrounded by a walled outside space.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the more huddled together or clustered central market and business area, buildings in Kerala compared to many other areas of India are often widely dispersed and scattered. The Indian historian A. Sreedhara Menon attributes this in part to the availability of good drinking water in all places (Menon 1979, 128). The common setting of a building in the plot of land was also necessitated by the benefit of wind for giving comfort in the hot and humid climate. Tightly clustered houses are rarely seen in villages, and by Indian standards large cities are absent in this landscape.

In the Kerala region, wooden houses have for centuries had distinctive architectural traditions as old as those of Hindu temples.<sup>38</sup> The abundance of timber allowed the evolution of this form of construction (Figure 55). Within Kerala, the basic traditional house module is the *nalukettu*, four blocks built around a courtyard into which the roof slopes on four sides, protecting a verandah from rain and harsh sun. Larger homes are known as *illams*, with rooms surrounding most often around one or two courtyards, although up to four courtyards can be found. There is usually a verandah before the main entrance. When the system of caste was prevalent, most visitors were not allowed inside the house and this space was meant for meeting them. This tradition

seems akin to the practice in Kerala synagogues where the *azara* was used in a similar fashion. While synagogues do not require the same spaces or plan configuration as these vernacular residences, their tradition as compounds made up of variety of connected or freestanding spaces surrounded by or connected by outdoor rooms or courtyards likely had some influence on synagogue architecture in Kerala.

The synagogues of Kerala are indeed a distinctive fusion of the vernacular traditions of the region. Kerala's unique way of building, developed over centuries, was influenced by the assortment of climatic, natural, and man-induced variables covered in this chapter. Considering once again that in the course of Jewish history synagogues have never conformed to stylistic rules or been resolved in unique forms, Kerala became home to an inimitable approach to synagogue design that was carried from one synagogue to the next. Influenced by regional Indian building practices coupled in simplified form with those of visiting traders and imperialists, the synagogues of Kerala are prime examples of the vernacular Kerala style. This is true from the oldest standing synagogue, the Paradesi in Mattancherry, which dates originally to 1568 to the now closed and never fully completed Tekkumbhagam Synagogue in Ernakulam, a relatively recent structure from the 1930s yet built in the traditional aesthetic.

## **CHAPTER 7 THE KERALA SYNAGOGUE AESTHETIC**

Today seven synagogue buildings stand in Kerala, although the Paradesi Synagogue of Jew Town in the Mattancherry area of Kochi is the only one still fully intact and the sole synagogue where religious services are still held. The second surviving building in Mattancherry is the Tekkumbagam Synagogue, albeit it was closed in the mid-1950s, eventually sold for commercial purposes, and its exterior was stripped and sent for display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in the 1990s. Today it is just a shell. In Ernakulam, the Tekkumbagam Synagogue is still owned by the Jewish community and in more recent years was used as community hall, although today it mostly sits unused. The nearby Kadavumbagam Synagogue has since the early 1980s been used by a member of the local Jewish community for his business. The Mala Synagogue has served since 1955 as a civic hall for the municipality, the Chendamangalam Synagogue was readapted in 2006 as India's Jewish museum, and the Parur Synagogue is now being restored by the government of Kerala as a cultural venue.

No one of the seven surviving synagogues of Kerala is identical to another, yet they share many features that bind and unify them. As a collection of buildings, there may be some variation in scale, details, treatment of materials, and planning, yet in a broader sense they are aesthetically akin. These mutual characteristics have been carried forth from synagogue to synagogue over the centuries as Kerala's Jews moved from one place to another or rebuilt their houses of prayer for whatever reason. While there is no physical evidence or recorded information on the architecture of Kerala's earliest synagogues believed to have been built in the early eleventh century in Cranganore, it makes sense to think that these first generation buildings served as models, or a prototype, for later ones to come. As a new synagogue was built, various



architectural and liturgical elements and conventions recalling those in Cranganore were likely included, even if they were expressed in different ways. Some of these deviations may have been subtle, such as in the shape of a bracket or window detail, while others were more pronounced, perhaps in the inclusion of new types and relationships of spaces. Over the centuries, new building conventions and stylistic influences from near or afar as later rounds of Jews settled in Kerala certainly impacted the next synagogue, yet, over a long period of time, fundamental components were maintained. As second and even later generation synagogues were rebuilt for various reasons, what could be described as a Kerala synagogue formula was devised. The result was a distinct way of expressing a religious building typology that based on its own lineage coupled with evolving local internal as well as external conditions and influences came into maturation.

The white-washed Kerala synagogues are not single buildings but, based on the various Jewish or non-Jewish, Indian or foreign, religious or secular, and historic or more contemporary influences already discussed in this thesis came to be organized as a collection of indoor and outdoor spaces, a compound, surrounded by a property wall or neighboring buildings. While today some of the Kerala are missing some of their pieces, it is likely that they or their predecessors had some type of gatehouse or porch. The entry to the synagogue compound was through this entry structure, which faced east. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the gatehouse has a long history in both religious and secular architectural applications in Kerala, and those found in the synagogues a much part of this lineage. They are usually two stories high and higher than neighboring, often Jewish owned residential and commercial buildings. This tradition, seen in other regions of the world as well, imparted a level of importance to the synagogue and perhaps – aside from its local associations – recalled in some way the physical as well as spiritual elevation of the ancient Temple atop Mount Moriah. In most cases, connecting the gatehouse to the sanctuary building was a breezeway of

varying lengths depending on the size and configuration of the synagogue property. The breezeway's ground level was open on two longitudinal sides except for possible columns or other supports. On its upper level, the space was more contained although not necessarily fully enclosed since lattice work, struts with opening between structural members, or perforated panels could have been used.

On the inside, the synagogues of Kerala are relatively simple. Perhaps this has as much to do with a reverence for the natural beauty outside and the inclination not to compete with what is there as it does with Jewish ideology. According to Judaic traditions, interiors of synagogues should be places where limited ornamentation and decoration is incorporated. Following this interpretation, it would be improper for Jewish houses of prayer to include literal images of humans, animals, or other animate objects since the space is intended as a house of God, and within it the Lord reigns supreme. Any such images could be perceived as idolatrous, something forbidden to Judaism. Synagogues have also long been devoid of religious symbols such as statues, busts, crosses, crucifixes, icons, censers, fonts, relics, or reliquaries. The inclusion of forms or representations of any of these entities would compete with the command of God and the fact that Jews, as a monotheistic people, pray directly to God and not through a representation or inter-mediator. Such decorations came to be regarded as contrary to the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth" (Exodus 20:4).

The limited interior decoration acceptable to synagogues does not mean that they need to be bare. Geometric, organic, and abstract decoration and ornamentation is allowed and common, but ultimately synagogues should be visually simple and understated. Certainly there are examples around the world where the insides of Jewish houses of prayer contain a rich use of color and decoration, and in fact Herod's Temple was a lavish structure featuring expensive and exotic materials and finishes. It did not,

however, contain graven images. There are ancient examples that did, including at excavated sites in North Africa, Israel, and Dura-Europos, yet they did not become the pattern to follow. The need for liturgical yet non-figurative art which fit comfortably into the Jewish non-representational tradition of ornaments, eternal lights, candelabra, and ark curtains has provided synagogues with opportunities to express themselves, and the ones in Kerala are no exception. Synagogue guidelines, including what is permitted and appropriate, have always lacking specifics, however, and for this reason there has never been a particular aesthetic for synagogue interiors. To shape a synagogue has long been an uncertain science, and the results have always been inconsistent. Lions and eagles as synagogue decorations, for example, can be found in many places, yet these as figural would seem inappropriate.

In comparison with some houses of worship, the synagogue, including any one in Kerala, was seen to be about simplicity itself, yet it did not lack meaningful symbols. The most striking object, located approximately in the center of the synagogue's sanctuary, was the *tebah*. This fixed island emphasized the central role of Torah in the synagogue worship. In some Kerala synagogues, the *tebot* are fabricated out of local wood and painted with real gold paint, while in the balance of buildings brass is used. At least one, more frequently two risers connect to the *tebah* in Kerala synagogues. The reason for a raised *tebah* in Kerala or any other synagogues is not exact, although a few explanations have been given. In order to exalt the sacredness of the *Sefer Torah*, it was read above the congregation. For more practical purposes, having the *tebah* raised allowed for better visual and acoustical lines.<sup>39</sup>

As a part of a building typology lacking overall design parameters, there are no specific rules associated with how the *tebah* needs to look or resolve itself aesthetically or functionally within the synagogue. A review of examples from around the world and dating back to medieval times reveals a variety of shapes and sizes, an overwhelming number of them are rectangular if not square and compact. For those that are not, they

are modified versions of this geometric with chamfer edges or curved edges. The balance has assumed other forms. The *tebah* at the Zabłudow Synagogue that once existed in Poland and the one at a synagogue in Ankara, Turkey are distinct for their octagonal shape. Circular or curved ones are rare, and if they are at all found, they are anomalies. Every Kerala synagogues features a *tebah* that is, in plan, the shape of a keyhole or lyre, and it is designed with a distinctive tiered railing design set on turned balusters.

The question to be asked is where their lyre shape comes from? As mentioned in the previous chapter, the dominance of the freestanding small circular shrine with a conical roof, not seen elsewhere in India, is a unique feature of the Hindu temple architecture of Kerala. The popularity of the circular shape in these local temples could have infiltrated the Kerala synagogues in their *tehot*. The typical Kerala synagogue *tebah*, as an example, is essentially a reduced version of the ruined Polpulli Shiva Temple at Palghat District in Kerala, with its circular form containing a set of stairs and an entranceway to the east, or the Rajah of Cochin's temple in Mattancherry (Figure 66).

The shape in plan of the *tebah* also strongly recalls that of the Shiva linga (Figure 65) that is fixed into a central freestanding pedestal called *linga-pitha* in the *garbha griha*, or innermost womb house or chamber, within some Hindu temples in Kerala.<sup>40</sup> The *linga-pitha* resembles a *ghata*, or pitcher, with a spout, and in plan so do the *teot* found in the synagogues of Kerala. In temples dedicated to the deity Shiva, an aniconic representation is used as a symbol for worship in temples can be found. Shiva means auspiciousness and linga means a sign or a symbol, and hence the Shiva linga is regarded as a "symbol of the great God of the universe who is all-auspiciousness" (Harshananda 1981, 6-8). Although scholars of the Hindu scriptures say that linga is merely an abstract symbol of the god and that too is made of its usual shape since several of its legends include a rock or even a pile of sand as a lingam or the symbol of Shiva and hence the form itself is irrelevant, the divine power that it represents is all that

matters, the round form resting on lyre-shaped and circular base is nevertheless popular. Since it is likely that many of the carpenters who built the Kerala synagogues were Hindu, it should not be surprising that these two central very important religious elements share similar shapes. Since, formally, the *tebah* was to be a dominant and important architectural object within the sanctuary not altogether different from the *linga-pitha*, the Hindu craftsman in the process of realizing it could have logically turned to what they had known.

It is Jewish custom to provide some type of railing of any material around the perimeter of the *tebah* since this helps demarcate the very special space as well as protects any person on the raised platform from falling over the edge. Other than it should be of a design that does not block the congregation's sight, hearing, or even smelling during the reading of the *Sefer Torah*, the aesthetic of this railing is not prescribed or fixed. In all the synagogues of Kerala, the *tebah* railing curiously resembles, at a much smaller scale and abstracted in its forms, the concept as well as some of the three-dimensional elements found at the circular guardrail with its gateway at the ancient Buddhist stupa at Sanchi, India (Figure 64).

Over time, a handful of general guidelines have developed influencing the design and building of synagogues. These impacted Jewish houses of prayer built throughout the world, including those in Kerala. Often synagogues were built near bodies of water. It has been suggested that this custom may have a common origin with the *Tasklikh* ceremony of *Rosh Hashanah* (Jewish New Year), in which the casting of transgressions in the water is a symbol of repentance and forgiveness. Alternatively, as the architectural historian Uri Kaploun points out, the site may have been chosen to obviate the need for a *mikveh*, the immersion bath used for ritual purification (Kaploun 1973, 50). This was the case with most Kerala synagogues, where there were never dedicated *mikvot* (plural of mikveh) built. Water has also played an important role in some Kerala synagogues in their providing their names, as in the case of the two Kadavumbagam

Synagogues, which in the local Malayalam language means “landing place.”

When possible, it is preferable that a visitor passes through an anteroom or vestibule before arriving at the sanctuary to preclude entering directly from the outside. Such a space not only has practical purposes as a visual and acoustical buffer zone, but it allow one the opportunity to shed the thoughts and cares of the outer world before entering the holiness of the inner sanctuary. All Kerala synagogues strictly follow this guideline through the incorporation of the *azara*.

It has long been to custom to orientate a synagogue in such a way so that the *heckal* or ark is positioned closest to Jerusalem and those engaged in prayer face in that direction. Although there have been exceptions to this rule, including some very early synagogues excavated in the Galilee area of northern Israel or throughout history due to site restrictions, this orientation is particularly prescribed in the Talmud for the recitation of the *Amidah* prayer.<sup>41</sup> It also allows those entering the sanctuary to acknowledge and bow at the ark upon entering. Most synagogues follow this orientation, including all those in Kerala. Since Jerusalem is to the west, the *heckal* is placed on the wall in that direction.

Within the sanctuary there should be windows, a guideline stemming from the description of Daniel prayed by windows facing the direction of Jerusalem.<sup>42</sup> The Talmud warns against praying in a room without windows, and the *halakhah*, or Jewish law, states that there should be twelve windows, perhaps symbolic of the twelve ancient tribes.<sup>43</sup> The sanctuaries of Kerala synagogues each contain ten windows, and according to local narratives they symbolize not the twelve but the ten lost tribes of Israel or the Ten Commandments. If the windows of the *azara* were included in the count, the numbers of windows in Kerala synagogues would tally to twelve. Some sources assert that the windows are required because they allow the supplicant a glimpse of the sky, the sight of which inspires reverence and devotion during prayer (Meek 1995, 67).

In a reference to the festival of *Sukkot*, or the harvest holiday, the Talmud stipulates that men and women were allotted separate area for congregation in the Temple, and from this passage derives the origin of the *mechitza*, meaning division, the partition screen in synagogues between the space reserved for men and that, generally in the rear, side, or upstairs, for women. According to Kaploun, further sources for the separation of the sexes during prayer are found in *mirashic* literature, where it is stated that men and women stood separately when the Israelites assembled at Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments (Kaploun 1973, 33). In all Kerala synagogues, the men always sat on the ground floor of the sanctuary space, and the women had a place on the second level of the building adjacent to the gallery that overlooked the sanctuary. Separating every one of these women's seating areas from the gallery that overlooks the sanctuary is a *mechitza*.

Another prominent fixture of the synagogue interior is the *aron ha-kodesh*, or *heckal*, wherein the *Sefer* Torahs are kept. Originally there was only a cabinet with shelves on which the scrolls were kept in a lying position. It was in a side room, and a curtain set it off from the congregation. During the *talmudic* period some centuries later, the cabinet was moved to the center of the east wall and made into a fixed feature of the synagogue architecture. The scrolls were appropriately adorned and arranged in a standing position so that they could be seen when the *heckal* was opened. The doors of the *heckal*, too, were adorned with carvings or artistic expression. The *parokhet* (curtain) in front of the *heckal* became an essential adjunct in imitation of the tabernacle built in ancient times when the Jews were on their way in the desert from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. The Bible reveals that Moses "put up the curtain. . .and screened off the Ark" (Exodus 40:21). In the Ancient Temple in Jerusalem, too, the Bible states that Solomon "made the veil" for the ark (1 Chronicles 3:14). These interpretations were embraced by the Kerala Jews, yet modified in ways that I will soon explain.

Unique to synagogues throughout the world is the second *tebah* found in all Kerala synagogues. It is located at the center the gallery level in a narrow space overlooking the sanctuary that is supporting by two brass or wooden columns that flank the entry doors to the sanctuary. While their true function is to support the gallery, although the sanctuaries in the narrower Kerala synagogues in fact do not require these intermediate columns since the end load-bearing walls of the building are all that are needed to hold up the gallery, over the years these twin profiled pillars have come to represent or recall the pairs of columns believed to have existed in the ancient temple in Jerusalem: Boaz and Jachin. All synagogues in Kerala feature this pair of supports, and the local narratives consistently allude to the belief that they are definitive references to Solomon's Temple. This connection between that synagogue and the Temple does not stop in Kerala since other Jewish houses of prayer also make similar claim. The columns in some of the Kerala synagogues are fabricated out of brass and highly polished with their aesthetic being similar to the large polished brass candle sticks or holders of incense ubiquitous to Kerala or to the supports as discussed previously in the thesis found in Hindu temple complexes (Figures 40 and 41). With the Boaz and Jachin connection, the design of the Kerala synagogue columns received a decidedly local design influence.

The special second *tebah* is reached via a steep wooden stair that is located in the northeast corner of the sanctuary to the right when entering the space. The stairs are used by the men who remove the *Sefer Torah* from the *heckal* and carry it upstairs to the second *tebah* during Shabbat and holiday service. At other times, the *Sefer Torah* is read from the ground floor *tebah*. The gallery is a narrow and long space. The second *tebah* is placed directly in the center of the gallery, where it is defined by the wood balustrades of the railing that bump out (in the form of a bow or square projection) over the double-height sanctuary. The reading platform, a flat wooden plane, is on average set 36" off the floor.



Adjacent to the gallery and second *tebah* is the women's seating area. This room is accessed via a pair of doors that swing into the women's area on axis with the second *tebah*. The gallery and women's seating area are adjacent to one another, but they are separated by the *mechitza*, or as earlier mentioned the perforated screened partition made of wood. This partition allows for the sights, sounds, and smells of the service to filter into the women's area but provides a degree of visual privacy and separation common to other orthodox synagogues throughout the world.

The second *tebah* in all Kerala synagogues is a truly unique liturgical as well as architectural feature (Figure 63). A second floor or highly-elevated *tebah* can sometimes be found in synagogues elsewhere in the world, but they are the one in the space. This is the case at the synagogue at Carpentras, France, which originally dates to the mid-fourteenth century and is the oldest Jewish house of prayer in the country (Krinsky 1985, 239). Here the *tebah* overlooks the sanctuary in the same manner that the one does in the synagogues of Kerala, but there is no second one there. The same condition can be found at the synagogue in Cavaillon France, which dates to 1499 and was rebuilt in the 1770s (Krinsky 1985, 242). In Istanbul, the Ahrida Synagogue has origins back to the sixteenth century. Its boat-shaped *tebah* (in reference to the reference in the Hebrew Bible to Noah's ark or the boat that baby Moses was cast on) is highly elevated above the sanctuary floor. In Bursa Turkey, the Mayor Synagogue was founded by Jews who settled in the Ottoman Empire after being expelled from Spain in the fifteenth century. It too has a very high *tebah*. In Italy, there are various synagogues that feature a highly raised *tebah*. Among these are the Sephardic Synagogue at Pesaro of the sixteenth century and the *Scuola Italiana* in Ancona of about the same period. These four synagogues all contain *tebot* that are essentially a full level up, although once again they are the one and only to be found in the sanctuary.

There are various theories about why the second *tebah* exists in Kerala synagogues. Ilana Weil writes that one reason for the reading of the *Sefer Torah* here is

that it was received from an elevated height on Mount Sinai, and thus recalls this important historical event. Another of her reasons is because the High Priest always read the *Sefer Torah* on the Day of Atonement near the women's area of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (Weil 2002, 57). A third explanation is that the *Sefer Torah* should be read here not during Shabbat and holiday occasions (versus weekly services) since it would be physically closest to the women, thereby paying homage to the importance given to women in the Kerala Jewish community and acknowledging their pivotal place as head of the Jewish household. The second *tebah* may just exist since the women normally did not attend the weekly services, and they would not have needed to hear the Torah reading. When they were present during for Shabbat and holidays, the more central location of the second *tebah* would have guaranteed that all members, both men and women, would have clearly heard the Torah chanting and seen the proceedings.

The *heckal* is normally the most sacred, and hence decorated or embellished feature of the synagogue throughout the world, and in the synagogues of Kerala this tradition is maintained. Although it can be seen as a storage cabinet for displaying and storing the Torah scrolls, it has a much greater meaning. It is representative of a physical home for the sacred Jewish text. On average eight to ten feet in width, Kerala synagogue *heckalot* are all beautiful hand-carved pieces fabricated from local teak wood, stained, and highlighted with real gold and/or silver, red, and sometimes green paint that stand out and make an impression against the simple whitewashed walls of all Kerala synagogues sanctuaries. The carvings on the surfaces of the *heckal* are mostly organic and floral in nature, popular motifs in many synagogues since no graven images or human or figural representations are generally permitted within Jewish houses of prayer. These natural forms are also popular in other secular and religious architecture in Kerala. Topping the *heckal* is large panel commonly featuring a series of festoons and swags surrounding a *keter*, or crown. The crown, a popular motif on cabinets

storing Torah scrolls in all regions of the world, represents the sacred and high place of the *Sefer Torah* in the Jewish religion and not the majestic system of a Jewish king.

Of interest here is the possible inspiration for the design of the Kerala synagogue *heckalot*. While it is true that they are frequently fabricated out of local teak, their overall aesthetic seems distinctly Italian, and particularly Venetian. When the Jews of Venice (and elsewhere in Italy) were legally consigned to the fringes of society and isolated from the local population when they were ordered by the Catholic Church to live on a small island on the outskirts of town in the early sixteenth century, they built a series of small and from the outside frequently inconspicuous synagogues (Wigoder 1986, 78). The interiors, far more decoated, commonly featured such embellishments as marble columns, marble-faced walls, and gilded reliefs and wood carvings. Despite the low status of the Jews, the skilled craftsmanship of the fittings and furnishings in these Jewish houses of prayer was among the finest to be found in Italy at the time. The oldest of the five main Venice synagogues is the fourth-floor Great Ashkenazi Synagogue that was built in 1528-9. Its ark and other architectural elements such as door surrounds are made of wood elaborately carved in the Baroque tradition and covered with gold leaf as well as highlights in bright red paint. The Canton Synagogue, another Askhenazi synagogue in the Venice Ghetto, has similar lavish details as do the nearby Italian, Levantine, and Conegliano Synagogues. In Rome, at least fourteen synagogues stood before the Catholic Church declared that the city's Jews needed to move into a ghetto. Since the Jewish community was so diverse, a proposal was made and accepted by the papal authorities to allow a deconsecrated church within the confines of ghetto to be divided into various prayer halls. The Catalan-Aragonese Synagogue, one of such halls that originally existed within a single ghetto synagogue, also had an ark with a comparable design as did the Casale Monferrato Synagogue in Italy's Piedmont region and the Sermide Synagogue, carved in 1543, in Mantua (Wigoder 1986, 78).

The aesthetic of these and other Italian arks is strikingly similar to the *heckalot* found or once existing in the Kerala synagogues. In both cases, the carvings are organic in pattern and elaborately designed. The fancy *heckal* that once existed at the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Mattancherry, Kochi before it was removed and shipped to Israel in 1955 when its congregation was preparing to immigrate there likewise features an organic, gilded design.<sup>44</sup> It dates only to the 1940s, when the previous *heckal* had been damaged by humidity, but it likely matched the earlier one. Its two swinging doors, each featuring a large and small decorated raised panel, are surrounded by a vine-like and floral frame that is flanked by two pairs of half fluted and half organically detailed columns supporting an entablature. Capping the entablature on each side of the *heckal* are twin broad and flowing vine-like plants, set in a small vase, with flowers and grapes. Since grapes have been never a fruit produced in India, it could be argued that this was an imported design. Set between the pair of floral arrangements is a high and wide bell-shaped panel with applied foliage, lotus flower medallions (which are distinctly Indian), swags, festoons, chains, and a central crown flanked by Stars of David with inset lotus flowers. Are these stars a Jewish symbol combined with an Indian motif, or are they a purely an Indian one since stars of this same pattern are common to the country?

In her edited book on the Jews of India, Orpha Slapak makes a connection between the arks of Italy and those in Kerala. Slapak writes presumably these stylistic influences came to India with a small community of Paradesi Jews who emigrated from Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Since the Kerala tradition of *heckal* design so closely matches the one from Italy, it is within reason to ponder whether there is any connection between these two places. While it would be natural for the Italian Jews living in Kerala to favor the beautiful *heckal* designs of their former land, it is less clear why all Kerala Jews choose to import variations of the Italian design in all the synagogues. Was it merely due to its visual beauty? Was it that things Italian were

revered? And since the *heckalot* are nearly identical if not clearly within the same tradition, did the Paradesi Jews in Kerala rely on drawings or their own memories when having them fabricated? Or, since Kerala was a significant port city, did the Jews made contact with travelers going from Italy to India to ascertain design details from the Italian arks? Though it there are many records of travelers and merchants going back and forth between Italy and India during the sixteenth century, there are no known documents that specifically address any Indo-Italian *heckalot* connection.

Since the Kerala Jews originating in Europe only built one synagogue for themselves, the Paradesi, in 1568, it is interesting to note that the other Kerala synagogues seemingly embraced this new fad of Italian *heckal* design, replacing existing ones (of unknown designs) in time. Yet since the building of other synagogues in Kerala, those serving the Malabari Jews, were sometimes initiated by the *mudaliyar* (the Kerala Jewish community leader) who always came from the Paradesi community, or in other cases orchestrated by some other Paradesi Jew, the importation of Paradesi Synagogue design elements (and taste) on the Malabari synagogues could seem quite logical. Chendamangalam Synagogue's *heckal* follows this tradition as did the one at Parur, although, as a result of the deterioration of an earlier one, it is dates only to 1891 and was never gilded or painted. In the early 1990s, this *heckal* was taken from the synagogue (and a make-shift one put in its place) and shipped to Israel to join the interior pieces of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Mattanchery to form a period room in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Today visitors can see it on permanent display as a relic of Kerala's Jewish past.

A symbol that was transferred from the ancient tabernacle and from the Temple in Jerusalem to all synagogues, including those in Kerala, was the eternal light. Here, too, the Hebrew Bible records that one of the priestly duties was to keep the candelabrum lit "before the Lord to burn regularly" (Leviticus 24:4). Hanging or standing in front of the ark the in every synagogue, and it is meant to represent the

menorah of the Temple in Jerusalem as well as the continuously burning fire on the altar of burnt offerings in front of the Temple. It also symbolizes God's eternal presence, and is therefore never extinguished. They are also intended to draw parallels between God and fire, or light, which is emphasized throughout the book of Exodus in the Torah (Wigoder 1986, 81). Similar to other Jewish liturgical objects that were never designed around any existing design parameters, the *ner tamid* fixtures vary considerably.

In Kerala's synagogues, *ner tamid* fixtures in cases did conform to a certain aesthetic. Hanging from a brass chain from the sanctuary's ceiling directly in front of the *heckal* was a modified version of the traditional Kerala *chattakam vilakku*. While this type of fixture normally contains one or two tiers of connected rings of brass holding clear glass canisters (used for Shabbat and holidays), the *ner tamid* has a large conical central form contained on a cylindrical leg, with four burners branching off from the base from which coconut oil was burned (Spalak 1995, 58). This sort of lighting element can be seen in churches; both Jews and Christians may have been influenced by the same European source since many were imported from Belgium and the Netherlands (Katz and Goldberg 1993, 74). All *ner tamids* did not follow this pattern however, and at the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam there was one from the eighteenth century made of cast bronze in a circular shape with attached spout resembling to some degree the massing of a Hindu *shiva linga* or Kerala synagogue *tebah*.<sup>45</sup>

The sanctuaries of Kerala synagogues are relatively simple spaces: rectangular with white-washed (or painted) chunam thick walls lined with operable windows with shutters. The floors are tiled and, with the exception of the Paradesi Synagogue with its not-original eighteenth century Chinese willow-pattern blue and white tiles, they are monochromatic and feature organic relief, if any at all. The ceilings of Kerala synagogues, flat or shallow trayed, are mostly coffered with shallow squares. Within each panel is usually a medallion of a stylized lotus flower. The lotus flower is an Indian symbol seen frequently in all types of buildings, and its organic nature makes it



Figure 1/MAP OF INDIA (INDIA TOURISM MAPS)



Figure 2/MAP OF KERALA



Figure 3/COPPER PLATES GIVEN TO THE KERALA JEWS PROVIDING PRIVILEGES AND RIGHTS (WITH PERMISSION FROM DR. SHALVA WEIL)



Figure 4/MAP OF CENTRAL KERALA



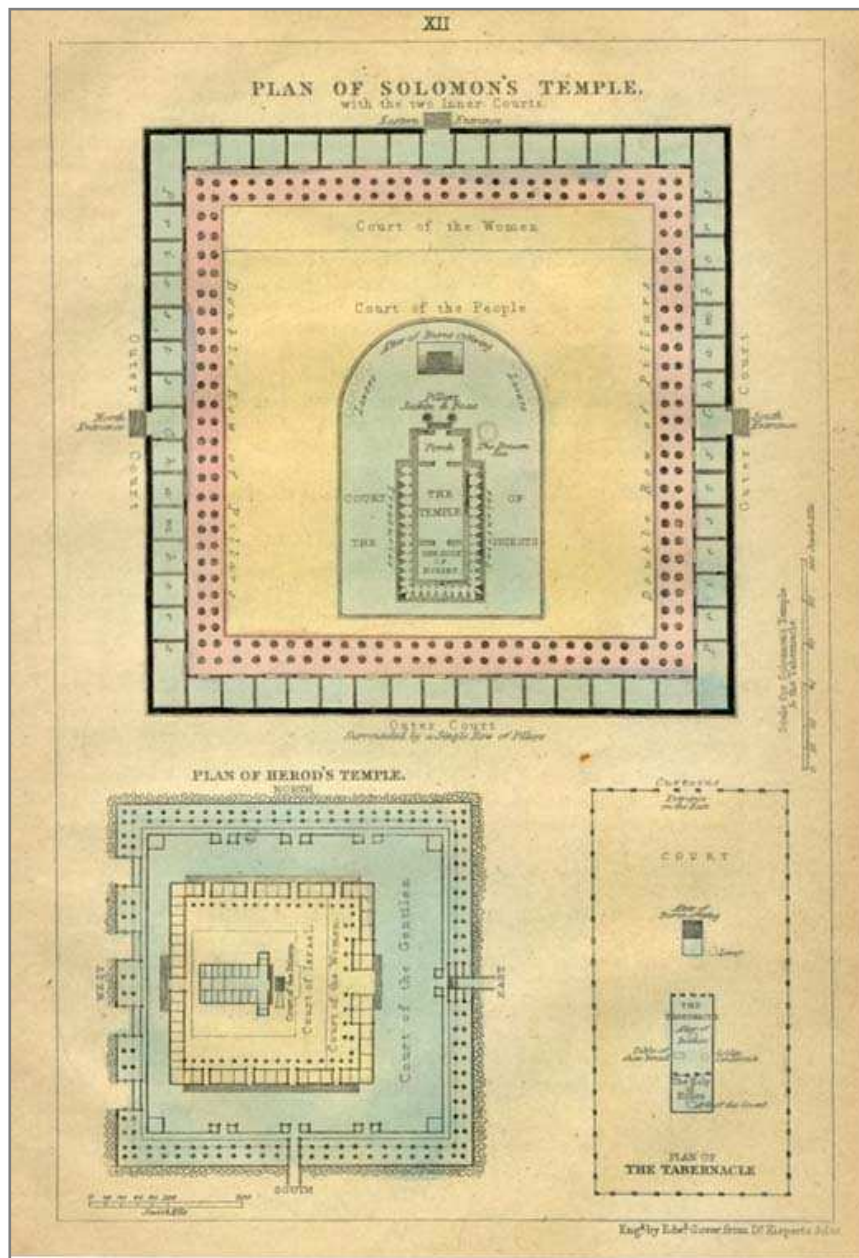


Figure 5/PLAN OF SOLOMON'S TEMPLE, HEROD'S TEMPLE, AND COURT OF THE TABERNACLE (WIKIPEDIA.COM)





Figure 6/KOCHANGADI SYNAGOGUE INSCRIPTION  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY A. WARONKER)



Figure 7/HOUSE BUILT ON THE SITE OF THE  
TEKKUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY A. WARONKER)



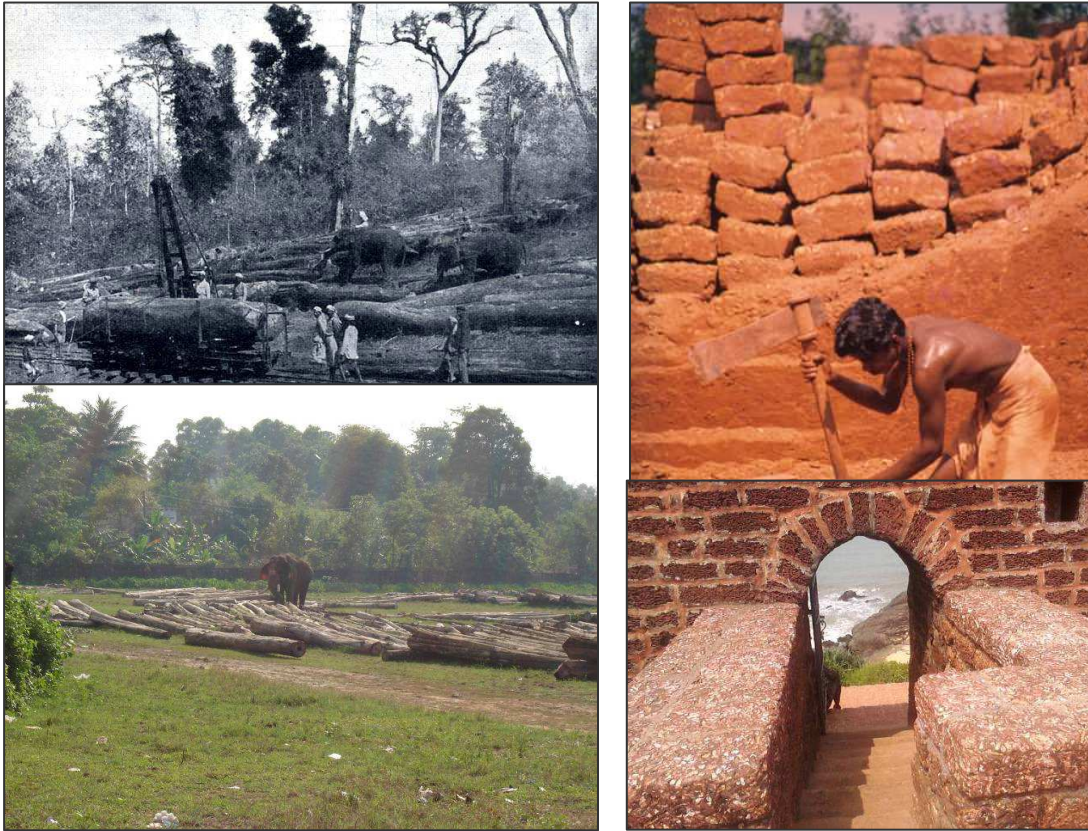
Figures 8 and 9/KERALA LANDSCAPE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 10 - 15/KERALA (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 16 and 17(LEFT)/KERALA TIMBER  
 Figures 18 and 19(RIGHT)/KERALA LATERITE  
 (KERALA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHEOLOGY PHOTOGRAPHS)



Figures 20 and 21/KERALA THATCHED AND WOVEN FROND ARCHITECTURE  
 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)

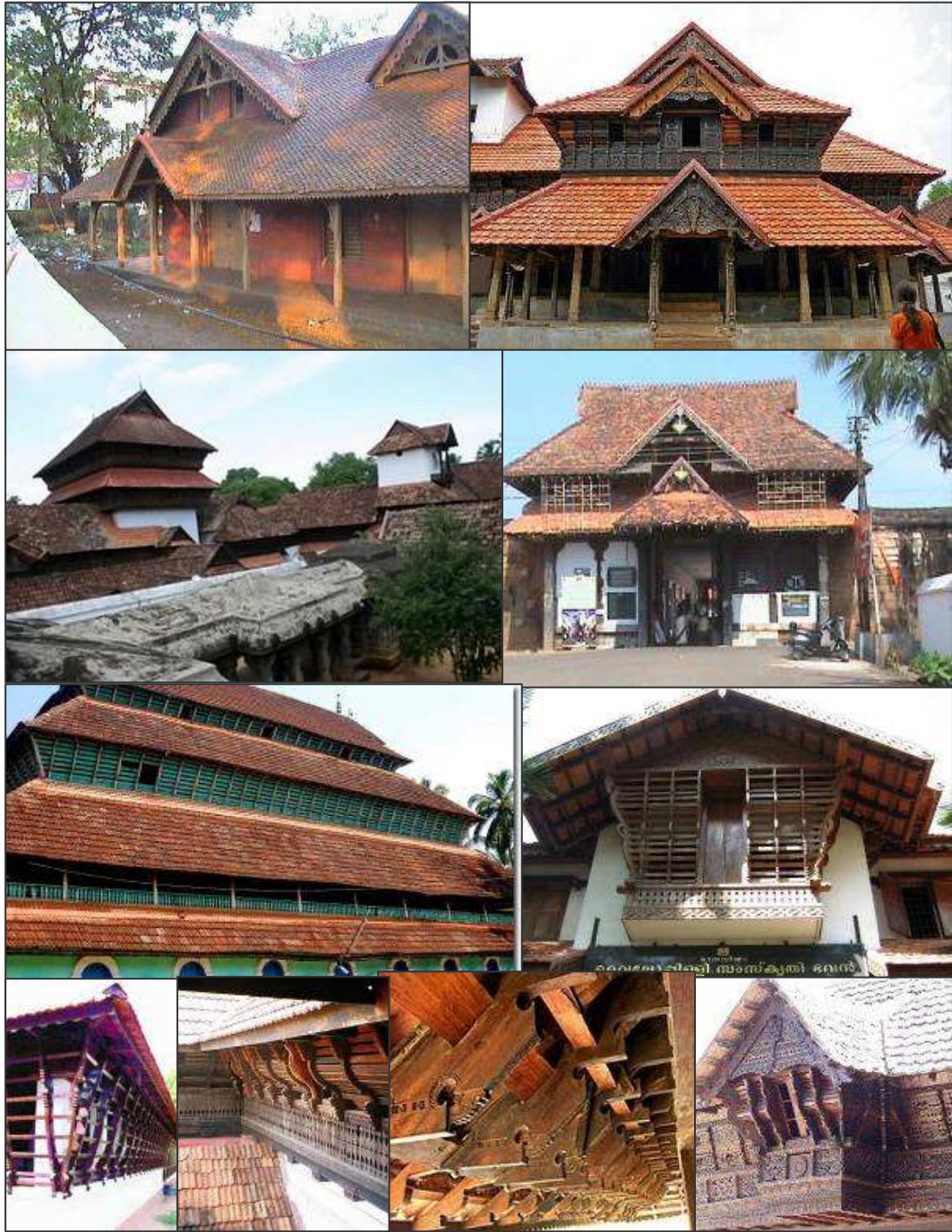


Figures 22, 23, and 24/  
THATCHING REPLACED BY CLAY ROOF TILES  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



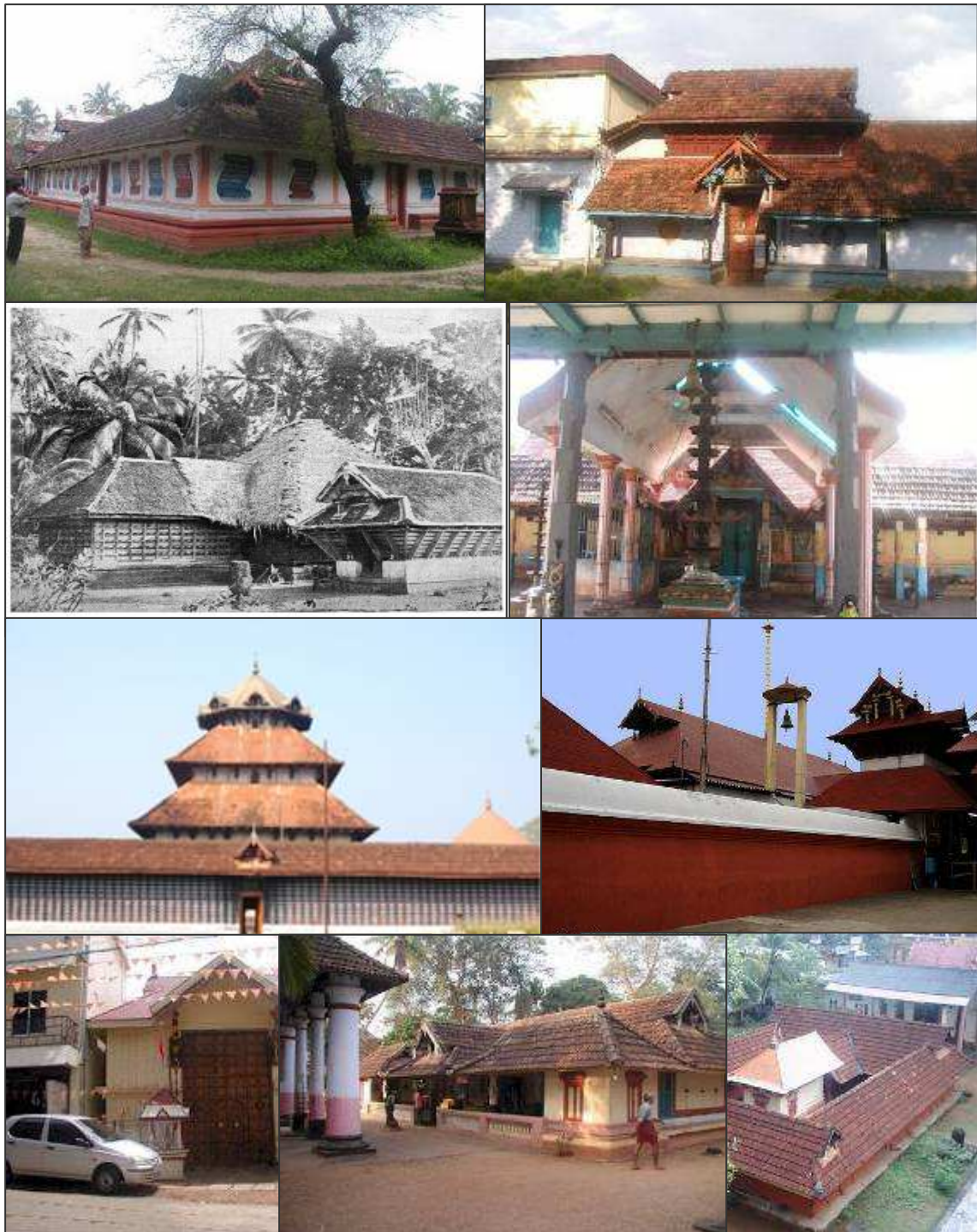
Figures 25 and 26  
LATERITE WALL CONSTRUCTION VENEERED IN CHUNAM  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 27 - 36/KERALA VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 37 - 46/KERALA HINDU TEMPLE  
ARCHITECTURE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER AND  
KERALA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHEOLOGY)



Figure 47 – 50/KERALA CHURCH ARCHITECTURE  
 Figure 51/CRANGANORE, KERALA MOSQUE, BEFORE RENOVATION  
 (JAY A. WARONKER AND KERALA DEPARTMENT OF ARCHEOLOGY)





Figures 52 – 59  
 “HIGH” OR COLONIAL-PERIOD KERALA ARCHITECTURE  
 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



Figures 60 - 64  
KERALA SYNAGOGUE TEBOT AND BUDDHIST STUPA AT SANCHI, INDIA  
Figures 65 and 66  
SHIVA LINGA AND CONICAL KERALA HINDU TEMPLE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER,  
EXCEPT FOR MIDDLE LEFT, BY TIRZA LAVI)

an acceptable and popular ornament with the Kerala synagogues. The coffered carved wood design of ceilings is common to Kerala secular and religious architecture, and in some cases the results are highly intricate and embellished. Compared to the relatively simple yet still expressive ceiling details in the sanctuary spaces at the Paradesi, Mala, Chendamangalam, Parur, and Kadavumbagam-Synagogues, the one that once existed at Kadavumbagam Synagogue, Mattancherry is particularly ornate (Figure 176).

The relative simplicity of the Kerala synagogue sanctuary spaces is offset by the gilded or polished brass curved *tebah* with its tiered railing and the spectacularly carved and most often gilded and painted *heckal*. Adding to the Kerala sanctuary experience was the myriad of ceiling hung fixtures. Light has long played a central role in ritual ceremonies in India, and a result of this was a profusion of lamp designs, some of which found their way into the synagogue and were adapted to its special needs. Aside from the *ner tamid*, a variety of glass, crystal, and various metals lanterns and chandeliers hung in all Kerala synagogues, some burning coconut oil since it would have been the only source of lighting until the buildings were electrified beginning in the 1960s (Figures 61 and 63). Whether European large crystal chandeliers, traditional dome covers, scalloped or fluted glass shades, *chattakam vilakku* brass lamps, globe lights, and an assortment of metal fixtures – these created a forest of color, texture, and material. In more recent years, ceiling fans, so common throughout the country, were added to some Kerala synagogue spaces. The whirling blades provided the only source of cooling others than cross-ventilation. Another peculiarity to all Kerala synagogues is the collection of exposed and sprawling electrical wiring and switches either retrofitted after the introduction of electricity or installed according to Indian building standards.

*PART TWO*  
CASE STUDIES

## **CHAPTER 8    THE LOST AND EXTANT SYNAGOGUES OF KERALA**

According to local narratives, the earliest Jewish settlements in Kerala were located at Cranganore, Palur, Pulut, and Madai. In time, due to persecution first by the Moors in the twelfth century and early sixteenth century and later by the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century, or because of natural disasters, the Jews living in these early settlements shifted to more secure places a short distance to the south in the same region under the relative protection of the Rajah of Cochin. In the process, the earliest synagogues were abandoned and lost, and the next generation of buildings in new locations was built. None of these synagogues survive as well, yet through narratives and Jewish folksongs sung by the women in Malayalam some things are known about them.

The first synagogue built in Cochin State predates when the Kerala Jews resettled there en bloc in the sixteenth century as a result of Portuguese aggression. Dating from 1344 and attributed to Joseph Azar, it was located in a village called Kochangadi (near Mattancherry), now a part of the city of Kochi. Built most likely when the Jews abandoned an area in or around Cranganore when the Perriyar River flooded, the synagogue is believed to have been razed by the army of Tipu Sultan during the Second Anglo-Mysore Wars in the 1780s. The building was never rebuilt, and the Jewish community is thought to have moved to nearby Kochi no later than 1795. At that time, they carried with them the inscription stone verifying its fourteenth century date of construction and placed it in the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Mattancherry (Sassoon 1932, 577). This stone slab, covered over in construction at one point, was re-discovered in 1818 (Johnson 1995, 123). Today it can be found inset in the east wall of the courtyard of the Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancherry (Figure 6).



Beginning in the fourteenth century and continuing into the mid-1800s, the Kerala Jews, according to narratives, built small synagogues not just in Kochangadi but to the south at Muttam, Tir-Tur, Saudi (or Southi), Palur, and Fort Cochin. A short distance to the north of Kochangadi and not far from Allepey to the south, a beautiful place known to tourists for its picturesque backwater boat tours, is Muttam, a village where a small enclave of Jews once existed. The settlement, located midway between Uppala and Kumbala in Kasaragod district, gets its name for the local Malayalam phrase meaning “front of the house which is spread with mud.” At some time a synagogue was built there, perhaps built by Ezechiel Rahabi for the convenience of Jews working on his estates, yet ultimately the small Jewish community Muttam may have been so persecuted by the armies of Tipu Sultan in the late eighteenth century that they were never able to recovery and the synagogue was closed (Segal 1993, 65 and Timberg 1986, 139).

The synagogue at Palur, located in a village south of Ernakulam and in the eastern part of Trichur district, was destroyed long ago, yet it is mentioned by the Dutch traveler Pereya de Paiva and some fellow Jews during their travels to the area in 1686-87. There they found ten well provided Jewish families and a synagogue, which may have been built by Ezechiel Rahabi for Jews living there and working on land that he owned (Yehudi 1989, 104 and Timberg 1986, 139). Palur’s synagogue is also referenced in a Jewish Malayalam folksongs sung by the women. The song, sung only by the women, reveals that the first Jews arrived in Palur, and then they had to flee to Cranganore. Some of the Palur Jews found peace only when they came to Kochi, where the rajah befriended and protected them. Perhaps the families who had formed the Kochangadi Synagogue in 1344 had come from Palur after that colony had been destroyed. For decades a silver *rimon* (ornament) placed as deocation on the *Sefer* Torah from the Palur Synagogue could be found in the *moshav* Nevatim Synagogue in Israel where some Kerala Jews had resettled in the 1950s, yet it was stolen when the synagogue was burglarized in 2009. The *rimon* had been moved from Palur to the Parur Synagogue before it was purchased

by the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam. There it remained for many years until it was brought to Israel (Johnson 1995, 123).

In reference to this same story, before the Kerala Jewish community went in decline, the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam had two *Sefer* Torahs, and one of them was inscribed “Palur Synagogue.” This *Sefer* Torah had a one point been moved to the Parur Synagogue, and they had planned on selling it at public auction to discharge debts by order of the court. With its golden cover, it eventually came into the possession of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam, which paid a price of 4000 rupees for the *Sefer* Torah (Bar Giora 1958, 131).

Just to the northwest of Kochi, on a small island in the bay called Tir-Tur that was once owned by a wealthy Paradesi trader by the name of Ezekiel Rahabi, another Kerala synagogue existed as per narratives. It was built in 1750 or 1756 for a few dozen Jewish families living there (Fischel 1981, 39). The Rahabi Family had fields on the island, and they used it during the summer months as a retreat. Rahabi settled ten Jewish families there to make sure that there was a *minyan* (quorum), although the congregation could have been larger. To honor the event of the building of the synagogue, a Jewish Malayalam folksong was composed. By 1761, it had closed when the Jews left the island Kochi as well as other local areas (Joshua 1988, 1). Another source claims that the Tir-Tur Synagogue was affected by Tipu Sultan’s aggression, and this led to the small congregation living the island. At that point the building was sold to the Chief Minister of Cochin (Segal 1993, 65).

Another Kerala synagogue dating from 1514 once existed at Saudi, which is the part of current-day Kochi located to the most northerly point of the city’s mainland “finger” peninsula. According to sources, the building existed until 1556, yet services were rarely held there (Joshua 1988, 1).

At one time a synagogue, the Tekkumbagam, stood in the Mattancherry area of Kochi on Synagogue Lane in Jew Town near the Paradesi Synagogue on the same, or

west side, of the street. A former leader of the Paradesi Jews, S. I. Hallegua, claimed that construction of the synagogue began in 1647 during Portuguese colonial rule and was completed by the *mudaliyar* (the high leader of the Kerala Jews) Jacob Castiel in 1687 on property owned by Paradesi Jews (Sassoon 1932, 577). During its long history, it is unclear whether the building was ever altered or renovated, although it was in continuous use until 1955, when most of the congregation immigrated to Israel. While in operation, and during select Jewish holidays and life-cycle events such as *Shimhat Torah* and wedding ceremonies, all the Jews living in Jew Town from both the Malabari and Paradesi communities visited the Tekkumbagam Synagogue as well as the two other synagogues in Jew Town: the Paradesi and Kadavumbagam.

When the Tekkumbagam Synagogue congregation left for India for Israel in 1955, the building and its property was turned over to the Paradesi community in Jew Town. The former synagogue sat for some time before it and its land were bought by a Paradesi Jew. Despite community misgivings about tearing down a building that was once a served a religious function, a perceived bad omen among most Indians, it was demolished to make room for a private residence. Today the two story unoccupied house with its white exterior and seven rooms still stands very near the Paradesi Synagogue (Figure 7).

At Fort Kochi, what one source described as *meshuhrarim*, or converted and freed slaves of Paradesi Jews, believed to have initiated the building of a Jewish prayer hall in 1848 (Joshua 1988, 1). This was in response to their failed effort to secure equal rights and standing within the Paradesi community, so as an act of protest they formally separated from it and organized their own congregation. Its leader, a man by the name of Avo (Abraham), who acted as the *sopher* and *shohet* (scribe and ritual slaughter of animals), along with others came down with the plague some time thereafter, so the building remained incomplete and religious services were never held there (Johnson 1995, 130). After the deaths, the remaining community are said to have returned to their former synagogue in Mattancherry (Yehudi 1989, 93).



Kerala is today home to seven synagogue buildings, four of which are located in the city of Kochi. Of the four, two can be found at its Mattancherry district (Figure 4) in Jew Town on Synagogue Lane: the Paradesi Synagogue, which was the only Jewish house of prayer built by the White, or Paradesi Jewish community and the sole synagogue in Kerala that remains fully intact and still operational, and the nearby Kadavumbagam Synagogue, which survives in part as a building although it has not been a house of prayer since 1955 when its congregation made up of Malabari Jews immigrated en masse to Israel. Two other synagogues in Kochi built by the Malabari Jews, also closed due to the diminished Jewish community since the mid-1950s, are located on the mainland of Ernakulam: the Tekkumbagam and Kadavumbagam Synagogues.

Kochi became an important city when a flood in 1341 created a natural safe port, replacing Cranganore to the north, which experienced problems of silting, as the chief harbor of the Malabar Coast. Its name is derived from Kocchazhi, meaning new or small harbor (Department of Archeology 2006). The city, with a population of around 600,000 today, is spread across islands and promontories in a beautiful location between the Arabian Sea and the backwaters that traverse the area (2001 Census of India). Two of its main sections, the bustling commercial Ernakulam with its two synagogues and the more tranquil peninsular district of Mattancherry to the west also with two synagogues, are linked by a popular system of pedestrian ferries as well as a network of roads and bridges (Figure 4).

Kerala's three other former synagogues, all built by the Malabari Jews, can be found to the north of Kochi in the town of Parur (Paravoor) and the nearby village of Chendamangalam, which are both in Ernakulam district, and at farther a field in Mala in Kerala Thrissur district (Figures 2 and 4). The balance of my thesis focuses these seven synagogue buildings, and each will be discussed in detail in individual chapters.

## **CHAPTER 9    PARUR (PARAVOOR) SYNAGOGUE**

Though each of the surviving seven Kerala synagogue is different in design and individually significant as a religious and communal center for a specific congregation, particularly the Paradesi Synagogue on Jew Street in Mattancherry since it is now the only functioning and fully intact sanctuary and for years a known destination for travelers world-over, it is the one in the town of Parur, also called Vadakkan (North) Paravoor to distinguish it from two other localities of the same name, and located mid-position south of Cranganore and north of Kochi, which is the largest of Kerala's synagogues and the most architecturally distinctive.<sup>46</sup> Although the mid-1950s were a time of significant decline for Parur Synagogue when much of its congregation immigrated to Israel, and it has not been an active place of worship since mid-1970s when its membership had so diminished that the synagogue could not be kept operational and hence for the past three decades not properly maintained to the degree that the building and property fell into derelict if not hazardous condition, it represents the most complete and elaborate example of a Jewish house of prayer incorporating the many influences of building design from this region of Kerala. So too was its architecture shaped by various Jewish building traditions. As a result, a distinct and remarkable style of synagogue architecture can be experienced at Parur.

According to the late twentieth century writings of the Dravidian Judaist historian Adv. Prem Doss Swami Doss Yehudi, Parur is home to one of the earliest enclaves of Jews in Kerala where a small group of families settled many centuries ago. Yehudi believes that first synagogue may have been built in 750, a particularly early date that only he subscribes to yet does not substantiate, and then rebuilt in 1164 after the first building was destroyed (Yehudi 1989, 90). This twelfth century date, following the

period of Moorish persecution of the Jews in Cranganore and their eventual shift south to Parur where they could be afforded relative protection by the tolerant Rajah of Cochin, is the one David Solomon Sassoon supports in his documentation on Kerala's synagogues (Sassoon 1932, 1056). As a result of Sassoon's work, the 1164 date is the one commonly cited in literature on the Kerala Jews, including by J. B. Segal, the notable historian of Kerala Jews (Segal 1993, 12). This structure fell into disrepair, and another structure was erected on the same site in 1616 according to its building inscription, a rectangular stone slab with Hebrew text that can still be seen inset in one of the exterior walls within the synagogue compound (shown on page 139). Due to the difficulty of the inscription text, some sources use the date 1614, while others indicate it was 1621.

According to local narratives, it is believed that the *ner tamid*, or the light that always burns, once hanging in the 1164 synagogue was transferred to the seventeenth century building.<sup>47</sup> According to this legend, the Jews of Parur were so rich and proud that they offered incense on a local altar in public. For this act of hubris, since their behavior seemed to recall a religious ceremony only reserved to the ancient Temple, the Parur Synagogue congregation were stricken with the plague. Their twelfth century synagogue fell into disuse, and the *ner tamid* was hung out on the street as a sign of contrition. It was seen there nearly two hundred years later by an English observer (Segal 1993, 12).

Prem Doss Swami Doss Yehudi recounts the same folk tale, adding the detail that the altar of incense placed by the Parur Jews in the street square had the same dimensions as one at the ancient Temple. Yet their effort to burn incense was thwarted, and the community was devastated by a pestilence. The onslaught was so sudden that it was interpreted as a punishment from heaven for their attempt to mimic or belittle the sacred rites of the Temple (Yehudi 1989, 89). Ruby Daniel, a Jew born in Kerala in 1912, recalled a different version of this legend. According to Daniel, when she was young there were still a few wealthy Jewish families living in Parur. The town had a thriving

Jewish community covering some blocks of the town, but at one point there was a great epidemic that could not be stopped. The *rabbanim*, or men versed in Jewish Law, were so bold that they set out to burn *ketoret*, or incense, like the Israelites did in the wilderness of Sinai when they were affected by an epidemic. Yet the *rabbanim* could not obtain, or they were unclear about all the necessary ingredients mentioned for this ritual in the Hebrew Bible, so they used whatever was locally available. As soon as the incense was lit, hundreds of people died. They should have heeded the warning which is read twice every morning in the *Shaharit* service: “If any ingredient is missing, it will be death” (Johnson 1995, 127).

David Yaacov (Jacob) Castiel, the fourth *mudaliyar* (community leader) of the Kerala Jews, was responsible for bringing the rebuilding of Parur Synagogue to fruition in 1616.<sup>48</sup> This is confirmed by the first part of the building’s Hebrew dedicatory inscription which translates into English as:

He who dwells in the rock (and) in the (burning) bush,  
For my sake may He dwell in my house.  
There shall be light in it for the house of Jacob –  
Truly it is dark in my exile.  
David son of Jacob has declared –  
The illustrious one, scion of Castile –  
A holy residence when it is completed,  
May it be (your) will that the Redeemer comes.

The initial letters of the eight lines form an acrostic with the name of the author, Elijah (Elihu) Ha Adoni, a known poet and scribe of *Sepher Azharot* (books of Jewish poetry) who died in 1631 (Bar Giora 1958, 222). Further down in the inscription there are marked letters of a Hebrew date equivalent to 1616 as to the synagogue’s date of construction (Read by Jay A. Waronker with assistance by Shalva Weil and Tirza Lavi).

According to a local Jewish song in Malayalam written by an anonymous Jewish poet to honor the synagogue, a fire damaged the building around 1662, and it was

refurbished (Simon 1945, 36). This blaze was likely set by the Portuguese since they by then had laid claim to this part of Kerala and also burned Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi about the same time. For more than one hundred and twenty years the renovated synagogue served the needs of the congregation until they experienced another dark period. When the Tipu Sultan from Mysore and his armies invaded Kerala in 1783 during the Second Mysore War and took possession of the region, he aggressively and ruthlessly saw to the rise of Muslim rule in South India. Over the next seven years, the fanatical Tipu Sultan was responsible for the destruction of literally thousands of non-Muslim religious buildings, which included Hindu and Jain temples, churches, and synagogues. He also tortured and forced the conversion of followers outside his faith. For those that resisted or refused, he saw that they were killed. It was during this period that Parur Synagogue was attacked and heavily damaged, and some of its members were killed (Johnson 1995, 127). According to Kerala-born Jew Ruby Daniel, of those who escaped death and managed to run away, some were converted to Christianity. When Tipu Sultan attacked and destroyed much of the synagogue, he expressed a wish that his coffee be brewed on the breast of Jewish women. Yet before he could realize this vicious act, he was called back to his home in Mysore as his father, Hyder Ali, was dying (Johnson 1995, 127).

Writing about the Kerala Jews, the Church of England missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, stationed in Kochi beginning in 1817, visited Parur and its synagogue along with the ones in nearby Chankotta (presumably Chennamangalam) and Mala during his tenure in the area. His observations were accounted by W. S. Hunt:

The chief of Mr. Dawson's interests was evidently the Jews. Their condition was calculated to excite compassion. Recently decimated by smallpox, and, only a few years before, the victims of Tipu's ferocity, they were despised by the rest of the community and were, for the most part, ignorant and degraded. He visited each place in which they lived. At Parur he found them using the porch of their synagogue for their services,

the rest of the building having been destroyed by Tipu; at Mala and Chankotta their synagogues were in ruins from the same cause. He found that the White Jews had no dealings with the Black Jews and that all alike were separated from the Gentiles. He computed their strength in 1529 and they had seven synagogues. (Hunt 1920, 153)

Dawson's observation seems to confirm that even after the passing of more than a quarter of a century the synagogue had yet to be rebuilt or repaired. By 1790, the Third Anglo-Mysore War marked the doom of Tipu Sultan as he had to bit by bit surrender his territories and eventually cede the kingdom of Malabar to the British authority by 1792. Since this formidable menace to the Jews of Parur had been wiped out, and even though the British were tolerant to Kerala's Jewish communities, it may seem odd that the synagogue took so long to rebuild. Considering that historians such as Segal, Yehudi, and Katz have written about the prosperity of the Parur Jewish community, the logic would be that they would have had the means to more quickly bring the synagogue back into form. Yet during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Parur Jewish community had declined in numbers and became less prosperous. Dawson's particularly bleak account asserts that they had undergone years of hardship and health issues, and that in the early years of the nineteenth century they were facing discrimination and difficult times. These factors could explain why the rebuilding of a proper synagogue took so long. For this reason or any other, based on Rev. Dawson's short passage, most of the structure as it stands today, with the possible exception of the gatehouse, which Dawson may have identified as the porch, could date no earlier than the second decade of the nineteenth century (Hunt 1920, 153).

When Parur's extant synagogue was realized on the same site as the previous building, it was constructed in the centuries-old Kerala tradition using locally quarried ashlar laterite stone blocks for its load-bearing walls that were veneered in chunam (Figure 73). These walls, very thick, were punctured by deeply-revealed doors and windows. Despite any memory of seventeenth-century Portuguese aggression against the

Kerala Jewish community, the synagogue at Parur incorporated Portuguese colonial detail, such as the fan-lite alette decoration, swirling rope patterns, decorated circular attic vents, or heavily revealed bands of trim on its wall surfaces. How much of these details drew from the 1616 synagogue or from the overall rooted design traditions of the area will never be known. With its locally cut and crafted wood roof framing exposed at its deep eaves in response to the heavy annual monsoons, flat profiled clay roof tiles covering its pitched surfaces, and carved wood gablet ends, the Parur Synagogue is an archetypical example of the vernacular Kerala style. As with other Kerala synagogues, it is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound. Among all Kerala synagogues, Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling in recent decades.<sup>49</sup> Over time, other Kerala synagogue compounds have lost some of their pieces for a variety of reasons or they tended to have a fewer or more a compact collection of spaces.

Unique to the synagogue at Parur is the way its parts are formally arranged and linked in a highly axial, extended, and ceremonial fashion. Of all Kerala's surviving synagogue buildings, the one in Parur has the longest procession from the street to the innermost *heckal* (Figures 67 – 70). As discussed earlier in my thesis, a similar organization can also be seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at various other religious buildings in the immediate region, including Syrian Christian and Catholic churches or mosques. As a local building type, there is little doubt that these buildings belonging to the larger religions influenced neighboring synagogue architecture or were representative of a way of building that included other faiths. The influence of secular design traditions is also obvious here in the ways the same materials and construction techniques, ones used for ages in Kerala, were utilized and expressed. Such traditions were also already mentioned in earlier in this essay. The similarities shared between the Parur Synagogue and the ritual linking of spaces that existed in the Court of the

Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem, and the borrowed terminology from these ancient sacred Jewish places, has been written about as well in an earlier chapter of my thesis.

At Parur, a typical low-rise Kerala small town set within a verdant landscape and with a population of 38,649 (2001 Indian Census), a visitor approaches the synagogue from Jews Street, which is today a minor and crudely paved straight road without dedicated sidewalks, curbing, or storm and sanitary sewers that runs north-south (Figures 71 and 75). The quiet street is approximately thirty-five feet wide, and it is located a short driving distance from the center of town to the southeast where the town hall, government buildings, rows of small shops and businesses, and bus terminal are located. Jews Street, its length can be walked in a few minutes, is today lined with one to two-storied homes and small businesses, including an architectural salvage company just north of the synagogue property. Many of these structures are surrounded by dense ground coverage and towering trees. Since my first visit to the Parur Synagogue in late 1990, the composition of buildings along this street has changed. Photographs taken of the same area from the 1970s capture an earlier phase of its metamorphosis. What were once majority antique, or pre-twentieth century traditional Kerala structures, over the decades many of these have been pulled down, forever altering the older vernacular aesthetic of historic Jew Street. A handful of lots now sit empty or have been replaced with nondescript modern houses and small commercial structures that are constructed of concrete and flat roofed.

Set on both sides of Jew Street at the south end, or the direction approached from the town center, is a chunky pair of cylindrical chunam over laterite stone ceremonial posts with conical tops (Figure 72). These columns, set on plinths, frame the road and announce the beginning of Jew Town. Photographs reveal that the pillars were at times whitewashed, and in other instances the raw chunam was expressed. A few years ago the one to the west was damaged, and its pieces are now strewn about or missing. There is a



plan to rebuild the column as part of the government of Kerala effort to restore Parur Synagogue in 2010-11. The opposite boundary of Jews Street dead ends at a picturesque tree lined canal, which was once just east of a stop of an active jetty. For years small boats ferried passengers and all sorts of wares to and from Jew Town and the adjacent market just to the west, but the area is now far calmer. These physical end points – the twin pillars and waterway – for years defined Jew Town not as a ghetto but a small and thriving neighborhood known to and recognized by the local Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Christian communities.

At times during its long history, the Parur Jewish community was particularly prosperous and prominent, even surpassing the far more renowned Paradesi community of Mattancherry in Kochi (Katz and Goldberg 1993, 67). Through this golden period as well as hard times, the congregation, although never described as large, was active well into the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> In the sixteenth century, the Dutch Jewish traveler Mosseh Pereyra de Paiva and the Dutch Governor of Kerala, A. Moens found one hundred Jewish families living there (Yehudi, 1989, 90). On a regular basis, for example, a Jewish market operated one street away to the west, during *Shabbat* no noise or busy traffic of any kind was supposed to pass through Jew Town, and on Jewish holidays and special events the non-Jews made an effort not to interfere with synagogue practices and rituals.<sup>51</sup> In their entire history, the prevailing account is that the members of the Parur Synagogue lived in harmony with all their neighbors. This was not always the case, however, and it should be noted that the Parur Jews did experience hardships and periods of discrimination, particularly by the Moors, Portuguese, Tipu Sultan, and even from some of their neighbors. Writing about the Kerala Jews, the Church of England missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, stationed in Cochin beginning in 1817, remarked that “they were despised by the rest of the community and were, for the most part, ignorant and degraded.” He also observed that they were completely separated from the Gentiles (Hunt 1920, 153).

By 1949, there were some three hundred Jews living in Parur (Yehudi 1989, 90). The sharp decline of the community began in the mid-1950s when the first and largest wave immigrated to Israel. The 1960s saw a continued, albeit slowed pace of migration to the Jewish homeland. By the mid-1970s, there were less than a dozen members left, and the synagogue was unable to form the required *minyan* (a quorum of ten) for religious services. During this period, the synagogue was maintained by the few remaining members, the Association of Kerala Jews, and others willing to help in some way, yet the reality was that the lack of funds or manpower led to the property's gradual deterioration. Into the 1990s, a handful of Jews had elected to stay in town and not make *aliya* (or to immigrate) to Israel. The family of Yitzhak Witzman Shlomo Shabbath even lived in the synagogue gatehouse until 1979 when the keys to the building were entrusted to Joseph (Meir) Simon, who lived across the street (Yehudi 1989, 90). During my visits to Parur in the early to mid-1990s, I met Joseph and members of his extended family. In time, most of the Simons immigrated to Israel as well, leaving Joseph and his wife Yahudith and their two children Sampson and Susan in Parur. In the late 1990s, for financial reasons and anticipating their own immigration to Israel, they too moved into the synagogue. During the times these two families lived in the gatehouse, some alterations on it were carried out. All the Simons ultimately immigrated to Israel in the early years of the twenty-first century. For the first time in many centuries, Parur proper was no longer home to a single Jew. Meir Simon's sister and her family, the Namias, who lived on the outskirts of town, were next given possession of the keys to the synagogue.<sup>52</sup> They were the custodians until 2009, when the control of the building was deeded over by the Association of Kerala Jews to the State of Kerala as a first step in its careful restoration and long term preservation.

Approximately mid-way on Jews Street on the west side is a two storied moderately pitched, hip gabled roofed synagogue gatehouse that has been altered and abused over the years, although it still stands proudly after many years of service (Figures

73 and 74). Although it is not the largest or most elaborately appointed building in Parur or even the immediate neighborhood, the synagogue gatehouse as a quintessential example of the vernacular Kerala building style still has curb appeal and charm. It is constructed of chunam veneer over laterite stone load bearing walls, wooden joists and rafters framed without the use of nails, carved and profiled wooden details at the gablet ends, flat profiled clay roof tiles, and wooden doors and window shutters. Originally a symmetrical structure measuring 31'-6" wide facing the street by 21'-6" deep, the gatehouse was designed with twin shuttered openings (never any framed glass windows) flanking a central rounded arched opening at the ground floor and a columned loggia running the width of its upstairs level yet extending only approximately a third of the building's overall depth (Figures 72, 73, 76, 77, 82, and 110).

The columns of the gatehouse, placed in pairs along the gatehouse façade, are distinctly Keralan in style with their somewhat bulbous shafts, deeply profiled bases, and stylized lotus flower capitals (Figure 79). Although this upper level has been altered in recent decades, it once contained a waist high railing made up of lathe-turned wooden balustrades set between the columns (Figures 74 and 110). These closely spaced, profiled balusters became a popular architectural detail during the Portuguese colonial period as a substitute for ironwork, which the Portuguese had preferred but was not a common local building material at the time. In the late 1990s, the balustrades were removed and replaced by a solid low painted stucco (not chunam) wall that engaged into the columns. Modern metal grilles secured to the columns were also added above the waist high wall and continuing up to the gatehouse's entablature (Figure 79). The floor of the gallery surround is today concrete and the ceiling is wood with exposed beams and purlins. The exterior yet covered gallery surround overlooking the street seems more suited to a residence than a gatehouse for a synagogue, but the builders of Parur's synagogue seemed to have drawn from the building and lifestyle conventions in the tropical west coast of India in including it. During the Portuguese colonial period,

verandahs and recessed porches in a variety of sizes and forms became popular, and the one at Parur Synagogue is indicative of this trend. These covered outdoor areas became a traditional component of Kerala architecture, and today the region is still replete with surviving antique examples of gallery surrounds, including some in the immediate neighborhood of the Parur Synagogue.

What comes to mind here when looking at the Parur synagogue gatehouse are the conceptual or even faithful similarities with the *padippura* (gatehouse) of Kerala's courtyard houses, the overlooks found in countless small to medium-scaled residences and palaces lining the streets of Kerala's villages and towns, and the Indo-Portuguese civic dwelling. Less exact in form but still to be mentioned as an influence to the Parur Synagogue gatehouse is the large and tall *gopura* (gatehouse) of local Hindu temples and the entry pavilion of the Jewish Temple that existed in Jerusalem. While the Temple gatehouse was surely not a literal design inspiration for the Parur Synagogue, it is conceivable that the Jewish community wished to acknowledge in concept the entry pavilion that once fronted this more sacred Jewish complex in Jerusalem. Aesthetically, however, the small building, built by local builders who were non-Jews, is distinctly vernacular Kerala.

In recent years, the original shuttered openings of the gatehouse have been replaced with modern ones, the steps leading up to the front doors partially covered over by a short concrete ramp, the low chunam walls (with their Portuguese colonial-inspired rope scroll designs at the ends) extending out from the body of the gatehouse removed, and the loggia has been partially filled in as already mentioned. Since my first visit to the synagogue in 1990, the building has been fully or partially repainted versus more correctly whitewashed periodically. Its colors have changed from white (the traditional whitewashed finish) with red and blue trim to yellow with green details and a black base (Figures 73 and 74). In recent years, a makeshift corrugated aluminum awning inappropriate to the traditional design of the gatehouse was installed in the center of the

gatehouse along the eave line as a protective cover over the entrance.

Arriving from the hot, bright, and dusty or wet, humid, and muddy outside and after ascending up the front ramp or three steps, the double wooden doors of Parur Synagogue's gatehouse swing into a dim and relatively cool central hall that measures 7'-0" wide by 20'-0" deep (Figures 80 and 83). While the building's opening is arched, the double doors, today painted brown, weathered, and horizontally slatted at the upper half and solid below, are rectangular, and the upper edges engaging into the gatehouse's wall when closed. Photographs from the 1970s and 80s show that the same doors were fully slatted, yet at one point the bottom half's voids were filled in. The doors, with old iron hardware, lead into the central hall, which is finished with a modern concrete and quarry tile floor, painted (versus whitewashed) and textured chunam or stained wood plank walls, and a high timber dark stained beamed ceiling spanning the full depth of the building. Today it is dirty and dreary. Up until recent decades this space was not electrified, so the only source of illumination would have been coconut oil lamps and natural light from the openings at both ends. In Kerala tradition, the coconut oil would be stored and burned in a bowled-shaped vessel engaged somewhere in the wall.

Flanking this central spine are rooms that we once used for miscellaneous synagogue activities, including a meeting/social room, office, and caretaker's quarters on the ground floor and a Jewish school above. At the ground floor room south of the central spine, entered by a single solid, stained wooden door swinging into the 10'-6" x 20' space, there was once a compact and steep wooden stair leading up to the second floor classrooms, but today it is missing. This stair was likely positioned towards the front, street-facing (east) wall since the solid ceiling today here looks modern, while the rest of the space still contains an older, stained wood beamed one that gives no hint of where a stair might have once pierced through it. This room, with its painted stucco (versus chunam) walls, concrete floor, and two modern east and west-facing openings (with no glass) is today dirty and empty except for a few framed individual or group

photographs hanging from the south wall or resting against it and sitting on the floor, and a small modern porcelain sink towards the northwest corner of the room (Figure 81). It was added at the time the space was used for residential purposes. In recent years, the room was electrified, and today a fluorescent fixture is mounted to a ceiling beam and an electrical box on the north wall. The cutout for the west-facing original window can still be made out today – it has been filled in and its sill remains in tact, yet today there is a small circular window with metal muntins and no glass in the upper right corner. On the east wall, the cutout for an earlier window containing wooden shutters only and no glass still exists, although it was replaced in the a few years ago with a modern one. These windows as originally designed provided the room with light natural and cross ventilation.

In the not so removed past, a displaced Parur Jewish man, Yitzhak Weizmann Shlomo Shabbat (his Hebrew versus Indian name) and his aged widower father Shlomo lived in the gatehouse. Their extended family had moved to Israel, but the two gentlemen remained in Parur until 1979. Upon leaving, the keys to the essentially inactive synagogue were handed over to Meir Simon, who resided with his family in a house across street just to the north from the synagogue. Most of Simon's extended family had immigrated to Israel, but a few stayed on in Parur to manage the family's business (Simon 1994). When the family closed or lost their company and sold their house, they moved into the now closed synagogue gatehouse in the mid-1990s. To accommodate those living in the gatehouse spaces, a rudimentary kitchen and plumbing were installed on the ground floor of the gatehouse in the north room (a 10'-6" x 20' space), and makeshift electrical service was added. Today the wood beamed ceiling in this room is in particularly poor condition and it noticeably sags (Figure 82). In addition to the crude updates to this space carried out by the Simons and their predecessors, the sink was added to the south room, limited electrification of the various spaces took place, and changes to the upstairs space, including a bathroom, were made. These modifications compromised

the architecture of the synagogue by piercing vent stacks through the walls or roof, installing haphazard electrical wiring, changing out of earlier doors and windows, and altering previous finishes, materials, colors, or design details (Figure 78). By 2000, the last of the Simons had left from Israel. In the process, Meir incredulously and clandestinely sold parts of the synagogue property not once but twice to local non-Jewish buyers, and he is believed to have pocketed the money. When this was eventually discovered, the Association of Kerala Jews under the leadership of Isaac Joshua intervened to repurchase and reclaim the sold portions, although their actions, with limited funds from the minute remaining community, were only partially successful.

Emerging from the rear of the gatehouse through a deep arched opening without any doors, a small walled courtyard with shade trees and vegetation is entered (Figures 86 and 87). The outdoor space measuring 28'-0" wide by 57'-0" deep is defined by the rear wall of the gatehouse to the east, the front wall of a second structure to the west, and perpendicular south and north running walls averaging 5'-6" high and constructed of laterite stone blocks dressed in chunam. The western ends of the walls feature at the top the scroll or volute design common to many Kerala walls and imported by the Portuguese colonialists. This exterior space is no longer maintained and hence overgrown, and its center path that connects to the next piece of the synagogue compound (a structure that resembles the first gatehouse) is barely discernable. This intimate outdoor room would have been used for synagogue activities, as a play ground for children, or enjoyed as a quiet outdoor transition area when the congregation was active (Figure 87). The courtyard is an architectonic device that adds to the succession of spatial experiences and the axial arrangement of Parur Synagogue; the goal to methodical draw the visitor from the hectic outside secular world to the religious and more private one within. At one point an awkward uncovered exterior concrete stair was tacked onto the southwest corner of the gatehouse and infringed on the outdoor space, and it replaced the one inside the south room as already mentioned that provided access to the upstairs spaces (Figure 106).

These upstairs rooms, with their stained wood and beamed ceiling, painted chunam or plaster walls, and concrete floor, have been altered over the years and are currently in derelict condition. They were originally intended to be used as a Jewish school (Figure 84)

Returning to the outdoor walled space, the next spatial experience forward is via a pair of doors centered in another two-storied structure similar in form and construction to the gatehouse yet marginally less wide (26'-6") and considerably less deep (9'-11'). The chunam walls of the first floor, for the past decade painted yellow but for many years prior whitewashed, are essentially blank except for the inset synagogue inscription in Hebrew to the right (north) side (Figure 85), and at the second level are matching openings (shutters but no glass set in frames) at each side and a central opening with a wood railing (Figures 86 and 87). Once through the set of doors and passing over a raised saddle, an 8'-0" wide x 9'-11" deep foyer is entered. Its finished floor elevation is a step down from the level of the proceeding outdoor area. This space is flanked by small twin storerooms that are each 9'-0" x 9'-11" in size (Figures 88 – 90). Although in derelict condition with many of their finishes compromised and details missing, these spaces each had solid wooden doors, walls of chunam, a double shuttered window (and without any frames featuring glass) along their west elevations, a flat wooden ceiling with beams, and floors paved in terracotta piles. The one on the right (north) was used for storing coconut oil for the synagogue's lanterns or other needs, and the other (to the south) for glass containers for the lanterns and other valuables.

On axis and linked to the foyer set between the two storerooms is a narrow and long breezeway. This structure, with its long wood-latticed second floor, is supported by stylized chunam columns set on solid plinths or octagonal bases (Figures 91 - 94). The design of the columns, with simple capitals, shafts with entasis, and profiled bases, appear vaguely similar to the classical Tuscan Order except for their chunky proportions and the absence of a capital abacus. This breezeway, with its extremely tall and shaped



wooden braces lining both sides of the structure and supporting the upper level, is a common architectural form in Kerala, and similar examples can be found as part of many secular and religious structures. Standing at ground level in this slender, covered yet unenclosed space (8'-0" wide x 46'-0" deep) with built-in benches partially along both sides used frequently by its members as a place for socializing before and after prayers and a random hard stone floor, one's attention is drawn forward to another pair of solid wooden doors set within a square-top opening. After ascending three risers and stepping over a raised saddle, these narrow rectangular portals with arched tops are set within a pair of larger rectangular doors. These doors within doors (meaning a pair of short and narrow rounded arched topped doors hinged within larger, square-topped ones), a common portal device seen throughout Kerala and India, are today painted a bright blue. The doors open into a rectangular *azara*, or anteroom, within the sanctuary building.

The *azara* (Figures 95 and 96), with its thick whitewashed chunam over laterite walls (the upper portions are white-washed while lower-most section of the walls are painted a yellow-orange), stained beamed ceiling, and terracotta tile floor, is lined with shuttered windows (once again without any framed glass) on all four sides, including a pair looking into the prayer room. Set within the lower third of these openings is a stained wooden *jali*, or perforated screen, which provided some degree of visual privacy between the *azara* and sanctuary. The design of the *jali* is distinctly vernacular Keralan. The *azara*, 16'-0" in depth and 22'-9" in width, was furnished with wooden benches for seating and various liturgical furnishings, served as a foyer, waiting area, place for outsiders or latecomers to seat, room to remove one's shoes and wash one's hands, space where life-cycle ceremonies such as a wedding and *brit mila* (circumcision) were prepared, and a buffer zone to the sanctuary proper. For any non-Jewish visitor that may have come to Parur Synagogue, the *azara* was as far as he would have been allowed during prayer.

Finally the sanctuary, or prayer space, with its lime plaster walls (for years

whitewashed but more recently partially painted) and terracotta tile floor, is reached on axis with the *azara* via more double doors. At these entry doors are one low riser and a raised saddle. A few steps into the space, flanking the path from the entry doors, are a matching pair of thin lathe-turned painted wooden columns. Today they are monochromatically painted a yellowish orange, but previously they were in a polychromatic color scheme (Figures 100 and 101). The various striations of the shaped columns were painted deep red, beige, brown, and pale blue. The columns support the gallery, their true function, yet they are commonly said to recall those probably found just in front of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, the columns of Boaz and Jachin. The popular narrative is to associate these supports with these ancient pillars, a welcoming and seemingly logical historical connection to the most sacred Jewish architectural monument, but it should not be overlooked that these posts are there for structural purposes, and a pair is needed to not impede the central axis yet support both sides of the long and cantilevered gallery. Since all Kerala synagogues feature such an overhanging gallery, a similar pair of columns, either also in stained or painted wood or in brass, can be found. Here, under the Parur Synagogue gallery held up by the columns, the painted wood ceiling (now the same bright blue as the entry doors, but for years stained), dropped beams, and carved brackets is low, or a tad under 8'-6" in height, and the space is intimate. The brackets are rather delicate, and they feature an applied lotus medallion.

Just beyond the so-called Boaz and Jachin columns, the prayer room becomes a double height and considerably larger space (Figures 98 – 101; 109). As the most important and frequently used room of the synagogue compound, it is fitting that the scale increases here. The sanctuary, measuring 24'-0" wide, 41'-8" deep (or about 38'-0" deep if excluding the gallery zone), and 17'-6 high, is lined with windows along all sides, many now in poor states of preservation. The upper panel of these windows feature true divided lites, while the lower panels are solid and painted the same bright blue found at the gallery. By the late twentieth century, a few had so badly deteriorated or been

vandalized that the openings had been boarded over. Its ten windows are said by Kerala's Jews to equal the numbers of Commandments given to the Jews by God.

Directly ahead, and in the approximate center of the sanctuary space, is a raised free-standing *tebah* fabricated out of locally grown wood and painted with real gold paint.<sup>53</sup> Two risers with one step connect to the *tebah* (Figure 99). In plan, the curved *tebah* is in the shape of a keyhole or lyre common to all Kerala synagogues, and it too features a tiered railing design set on turned balusters. It was at the *tebah* that the *Sefer Torah* was unscrolled and routinely read during weekday prayers. Surrounding the perimeter of this central raised space as well as along the sanctuary's walls would have been freestanding wooden benches for the male members of the congregation and sometimes their children, who either sat with their fathers on the ground level or their mothers in a dedicated space for the women on the upper level behind the gallery.

Positioned at the far end of the sanctuary, and on a direct axis with the doors into the prayer space and the *tebah*, the *heckal* is a fitting termination to the long axial and dramatic procession at Parur Synagogue. From the entry doors leading into the gatehouse to the doors of the *heckal*, the visitor has journeyed nearly two hundred feet. Here there is no separate *garbha-griha*, or womb chamber, found in Hindu temples or innermost sanctum for the Holy of Holies as in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, but a traditional shallow cabinet engaged in the wall closest to Jerusalem as per Jewish custom. In Parur, this is to the west. The *heckal* was once used for storing the Torah scrolls, which are absent today. The once very large and fancy cabinet with floral and organic relief carved out of local teak was relocated to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in the early 1990s, where it is now prominently on display within a period room made up of the mill and trim work as well as the fittings and furnishings of the former Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Mattancherry.<sup>54</sup> Parur Synagogue's prior *heckal* was never painted unlike others in Kerala synagogues, and it dates only from 1891 since the earlier one had deteriorated to such a degree that it needed to be replaced (Slapak 1995, 57) (Figure 105).

When the old *heckal* was removed in the early 1990s, an inferior stand-in faced in burnt orange ceramic tiles and featuring a vaulted top was put in its place (Figure 98).

Hanging from the synagogue's shallow tray ceiling, paneled in a grid of faded painted, small recessed squares each filled with a stylized lotus medallion, a popular Indian motif, were an array of colored glass, crystal, and metal chandeliers and lanterns (Figure 109). Many of them were fabricated in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands and then imported, a tradition seen in all sorts of buildings throughout India. The natural light passing through the red, orange, amber, blue, green, or clear globe shades or reflecting against the polished metals of other fixtures during the day must have been a beautiful sight surpassed only by the flickering coconut oil flames within these chandeliers and lanterns at night. Not used in recent times with some missing or broken, it was for years nonetheless easy to imagine this forest of fixtures creating a pleasant sensory experience. In early 2009, thieves broke into the synagogue and smashed the glass sections of the remaining chandeliers and lanterns to extract the valuable metal within.

Overlooking the double-height sanctuary is a shallow gallery the width of the synagogue that is reached by a steep ladder-like stair in northeast corner (Figure 97). Various narratives told by members of the Kerala Jewish community contend that this difficult to climb stair reflects the seriousness of Judaism or that it contains twelve treads in homage to the number of ancient Jewish tribes (there are in fact sixteen and not twelve steps), but the confined floor space for the stair itself likely has as much to do with its compactness as any theological premise. The small balcony space is often said to be unique to synagogues around the world for its second *tebah*, an area accentuated by the bow in the center of the gallery railing (Figure 99). From here, versus exclusively on the main level of the sanctuary where the men sat and the *tebah* was used for weekdays prayers, the *Sefer Torah* was carried up the steep stair and read on Shabbat and holiday occasions atop a flat table surface engaged in the gallery guardrail. The original railing

design along the second *tebah*, which bows out over the sanctuary, is no longer fully intact as it was once multi-tiered. Behind the second *tebah* is a carved wooden partition that separates this space from the women's seating section (Figure 102). This type of screen wall, or *mechitza*, is traditional to some synagogue architecture where men and women congregate and prayer separately. While the design element is common to Jewish architecture, a similar device can be found in much Mughal and Islamic architecture in India. It allows for the sounds, sights, and smells of the prayer service or other activity to permeate but controls the connection and contact between the women and men.

The women's area of the Parur Synagogue, measuring 16'-0" in depth and 22'-9" in width, features a wooden plank floor, a stained wooden beamed ceiling, and chunam over laterite walls punctured by shuttered (no glass) openings along the north and south elevations (Figure 102). This space was once furnished with wooden benches for women and their children to sit and pray during the service. Access to the synagogue's attic over the sanctuary and gallery is via a small opening in the upper western wall to the south corner of the women's seating area. To get to this space, a ladder would have been brought into the synagogue. The floor of the attic is finished with wooden planks and, looking up, the rafters and underside of the clay roof tiles can be seen. Today, roughly in the center of the space, an anchor affixed to the floor which likely supported a heavy chandelier in the sanctuary remains. This large and open space was once used as the *geniza*, a storage room or depository where decommissioned, worn out prayer books and other written liturgical objects, those no longer suitable for use, would have been held before they could receive a proper cemetery burial since Jewish traditions forbids writings containing the name of God from being merely discarded.

Adjacent to the women's seating area is a centered opening in the otherwise blank eastern wall providing a connection to the long and narrow attic space over the breezeway (Figure 105). This area was once used as overflow space for the women or as a place for children to congregate and play near their mothers yet far enough away from

the religious service so as not to disturb it. The breezeway, purely Keralan in aesthetic, is well ventilated and gently lit by diffused daylight, the lower structure of the pent roof meets the curved struts, between which run ranks of laths, giving a venetian blind effect. This peculiar system of shaped struts and laths forms a lattice wall that is distinct to the Malabar coastal region. This unique method construction permitted the passage of light and air into the interior in a climate that remains humid throughout most of the year. Constructed totally in wood, each horizontal strut links with a vertical purlin. The purlins have a distinct profile to allow the lattice screen to splay out from where it begins atop a knee wall to where it ends at the roof's eave. Aligned with the knee wall are space posts that run from a header to the floor. The floor is finished in wide planks of wood.

The proportions of the room, 45'-6" long by 7'-6" wide, and its slat design may be visually dynamic and interesting, but it does not lend itself to a practical use beyond being a circulation and overflow zone. To the end of this space is another room, which is fully enclosed, that is above the foyer and twin storage rooms on the ground floor. The room, with chunam finished walls, a shuttered opening along the south wall, a pair of shuttered openings flanking a pair of solid wooden doors with wooden guardrail centered on the east wall and overlooking the courtyard space, and a set of wooden doors along the north wall, has for years had a rotted wooden floor, so walking on it has been hazardous (Figure 104). The room contains no finished ceiling but rather it is opened to the underside of the sloped roof rafters supporting the purlins and clay roof tiles. This space functioned as another circulation zone and overflow area for women and children, so the doors along the north elevation once led out to an exterior stair to the ground level. For the past few decades the stair, engaged to the north side of the second gatehouse, has not been in place. According to a description by Tirza Lavi, a former member of the community who lived here until 1971 until she and her family immigrated to Israel, the stair was compact, square in shape, had a shed roof, and contained a series of turns and

intermittent landings (Lavi 2010). A mid-1970s photograph by Barbara Johnson fortunately captures the now missing stair (Figure 106), and with her permission I recently turned over a copy of it to the Kerala office of the Department of Archeology to assist in the restoration effort of Parur Synagogue.

Parur Synagogue includes spaces that seem unnecessary or a duplication of the building program. The space above the breezeway and the room above the anteroom and twin storage areas are, for example, oddly proportioned and hence not conducive to practical use or are too distant from main activity spaces to be useful. It is doubtful that the Jews of Parur requested these areas as they were designed, but rather that they were realized as a result of drawing from the traditions of vernacular Keralan architecture that had little to do with the organization and operation of a synagogue. These spaces, familiar to other Kerala buildings featuring breezeways and anterooms, were then simply imported to the synagogue. While the spaces may ultimately work, they are not the most logical and appropriate ones for Jewish liturgical needs or for serving as practical circulation and gathering spaces.

Seen from the courtyard, Parur's sanctuary building is a two story structure with an attic (Figure 110). It has a gable end at the (east) side where it meets the two-story breezeway, yet the opposite (west) end has a hipped roof. The sanctuary's exterior walls, finished in chunam that have been painted, feature limited detail: shallow corner pilasters (a common feature of Portuguese-colonial buildings), a broad band of trim separating the first and second floors, a thin line of trim between the second floor and attic, first and second floor windows set into the thick walls, and small attic windows. The fanciest feature is the circular attic vent with a six-leafed floral inset that is bordered by a revealed floral pattern. Just above this vent, and at the apex of the gable, is another Portuguese colonial-inspired half round fan-like alette with radiating striations. The alette is set upon a horizontal band of trim. The sanctuary building's roof overhangs, in Kerala fashion, are very deep and of an open design. This allows the rafters, shaped at the end, as well as

the furring strips and clay roof tiles to be exposed. The open eave also permits air to circulate within the attic space.

The sanctuary building is surrounded on all sides by ample, soft-surface space surrounded by a six foot high chunam veneer over laterite stone wall. To the rear of the synagogue, the courtyard measures some 45' deep and on the north and east sides there is a nearly equal amount of area (Figures 69 and 70). During the years when the synagogue was in active service, this courtyard functioned as a pleasant garden and from the outside world. Some Kerala Jewish holidays and life-cycle events were celebrated in this outside area, and in later years it was used as a badminton court and playing field (Lavi 2010). Today this space is entirely overgrown and nearly impossible to navigate, and careful attention to venomous snakes and other hazards needs to be taken.<sup>55</sup> Never during my own visits to the synagogue since 1990 have I been able to comfortably circumambulate around the courtyard space. The rear, or west, wall of the court borders the back side of property and buildings that line the Parur market. Some of these buildings once used for commercial purposes at the front and residences to the rear were once Jewish owned and operated.

Despite its current-day imperfect condition, the synagogue at Parur still offers any visitor a dramatic and memorable experience. From the hustle and bustle of street life, the pace is slowed the moment the synagogue compound is approached and entered. A shift from the secular world towards the sacred realm within is realized gradually through its series of indoor and outdoor rooms all ceremoniously and dramatically linked. While in Judaism there is no belief that the interior of a synagogue represents the cosmos or spiritual world as understood in some form in Hinduism, Buddhism, and others faiths, the synagogue at Parur is still a house of God. Within this domain comes a succession of places and spaces vested with spirituality, tranquility, and purpose that are indeed separated from the non-religious outside to the religious inside. These are linked by an axial and formal procession that brings a sense of order as well as pageantry to the

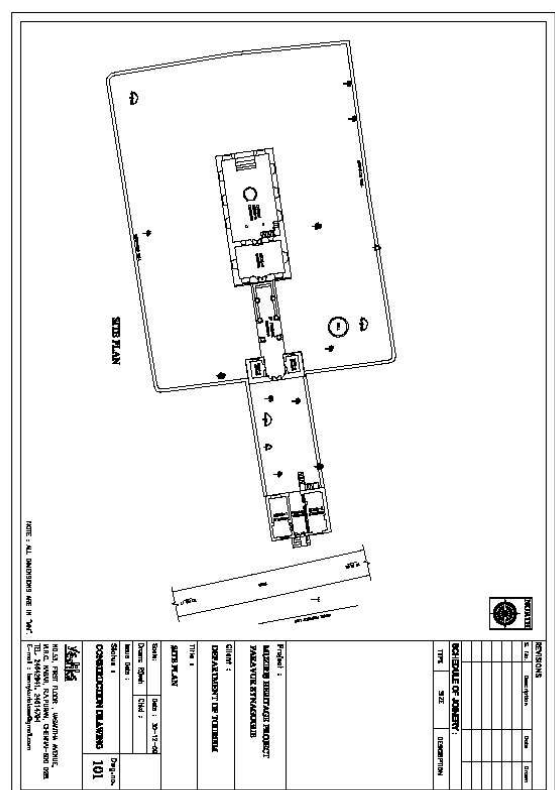
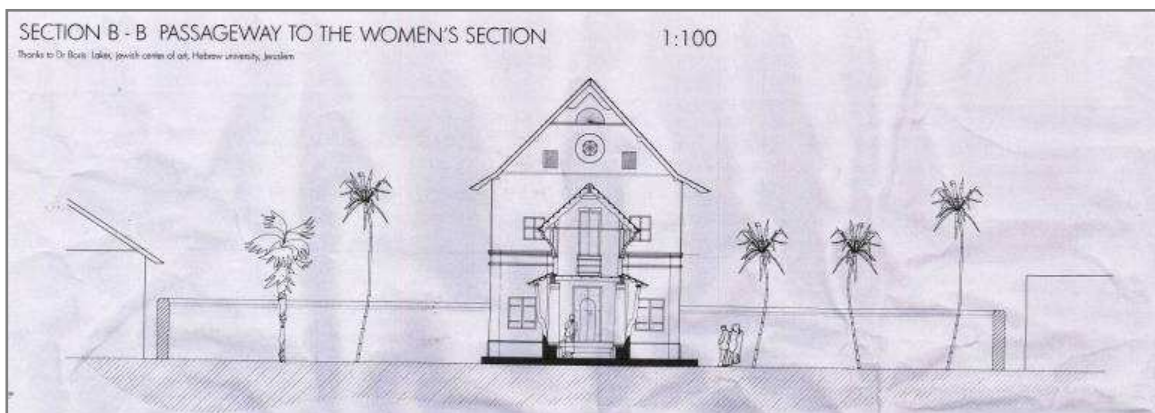


synagogue. The straight path has been deliberately set and clear in its intent, and it places the visitor at ease. There are no clumsy transitions or uncertain moments over where to go or what to do next, yet the experiences as they unfold are hardly dull. Here the mood and emotion of the visit, a spatial journey, comes into play. Long, drawn out, and direct paths are practical and accommodating for groups congregating as well, evidenced by the tradition within many religious building plans, including the early Christian basilica and many Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples.

At Parur Synagogue, a variety of interior or exterior and combination spaces were introduced throughout its long procession when the synagogue was operational, and with these came an assortment of experiences. In its days of service and glory, these were used for social, festival, communal, educational, organizational, and of course religious purposes. Natural light has always been an important ingredient in architecture, and Parur Synagogue, never fully electrified (it was only until the 1960s that electricity was introduced to the building at all), was a part of this tradition. By way of spaces that were bright to dim to dark, flooded with sunshine through mottled glass panes, filtered by daylight via carved wooden screens, or glowing with the flames of its oil lanterns after dark, light within the synagogue at Parur could be experienced in a variety of intensities and patterns. With this came a play on shape, size, and proportion. Long against thin, high versus low, open yet covered, indoor and outdoor, step up to step down, rectangular or circular, flat opposed to pitched, and dropped ceiling compared to double height – the places and spaces at Parur Synagogue were diverse, interspersed, and cleverly manipulated. Tactile experiences were played out to their fullest as well. From the feel of the wrought iron door hardware, textured chunam walls, tropical garden plants and grasses, smooth painted surfaces of the stepped *tebah*, leather prayer books, hard timber benches, uneven stone and terracotta floors, polished gold or silver Torah scrolls *keterim* (crowns) and *rimonim* (finials), turned wooden posts, to the rich and soft fabrics draping the *tebah* and *heckal*, one became engaged in the elements and events of the synagogue.

Architecture extends well beyond the material, physical, and structural aspects of a place. The understanding of a building also involves how it is felt, the emotions generated by being there, and the manner in which it is used. Hence also a part of the history of the Parur Synagogue was the sensorial pleasures of taste, smell, and sound. The aromas of the coconut oil used for illumination, the burning of Shabbat and Hanukkah candles, the sweet wine blessed in prayer, and the kosher dishes served on holidays and special events added much to its overall sense of place. So too did the jingle of the *Sefer* Torah crowns and finials as they were marched around the synagogue, the chanting of the Torah and *haftorah* portions during prayer service, the clapping of hands or the stomping of feet during holiday celebrations, the patter of footsteps on the honed terracotta tiled floor, or the voices of children playing in and about the synagogue spaces. Borrowing from the tradition followed by outside faiths in India, the Jews of Parur in later years removed their shoes when entering the synagogue sanctuary (in earlier times the Jews wore slippers stored the *azara* within the sanctuary). With the many design and working elements already mentioned, this custom of bare feet attests to the influences other have had on both the physical and spiritual make up and atmosphere of this synagogue.

At the synagogue at Parur, local and imported traditions of the region fused beautifully with the needs and requirements of the Kerala Jewish community. Making this phenomenon even more special is the inimitable spatial and processional qualities found only at the Parur Synagogue. Even it is currently unused and hapless state with the *heckal* and much of its furniture and fittings long gone, any visitor to this house of prayer can still sense the former beauty and eloquence of the place. In recent years the building compound may be altered, nearly empty, dark, soiled, and badly deteriorated, but there remained an undeniable aura and energy here. The synagogue is not only an important religious site but also a significant national landmark.



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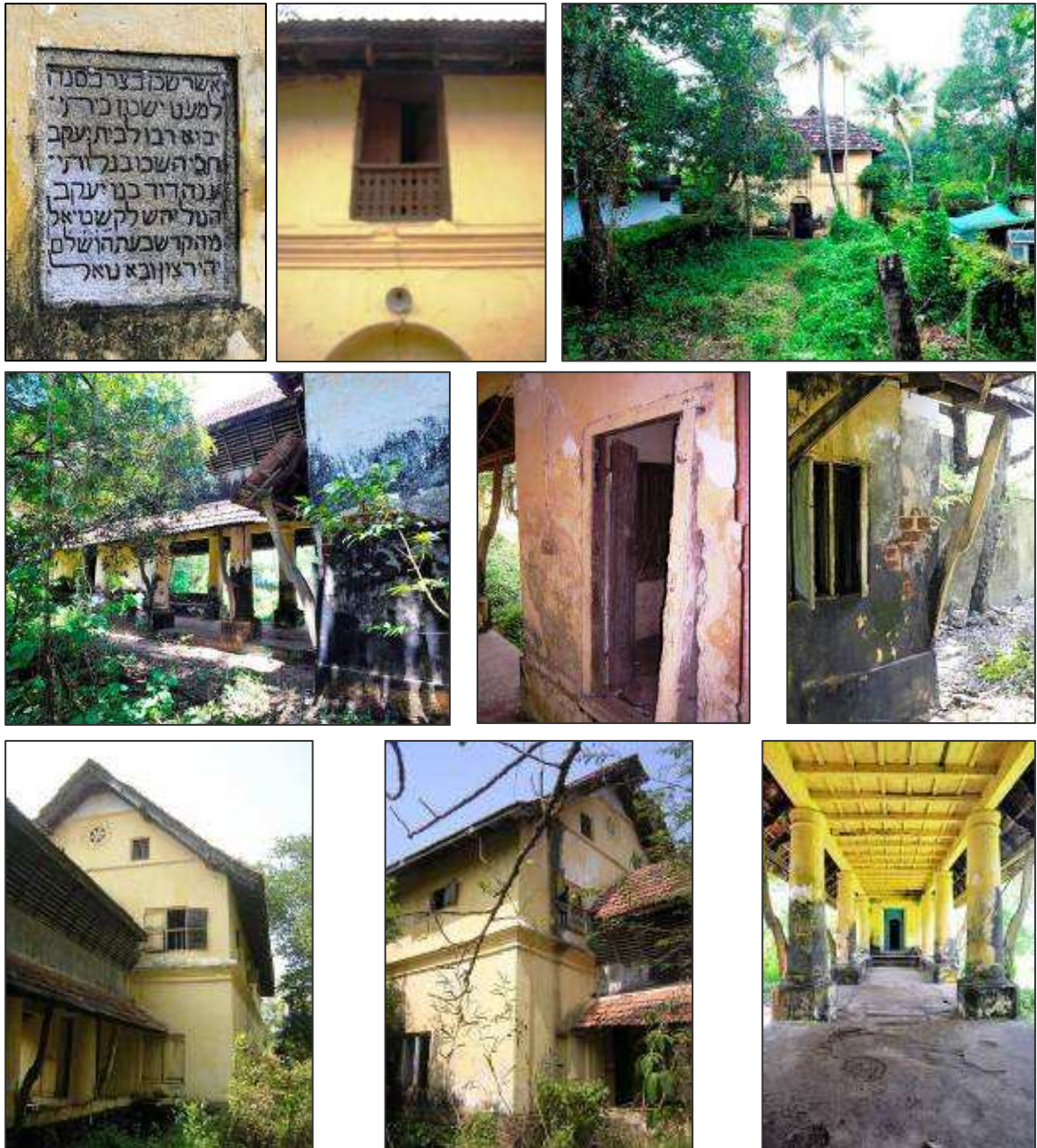
Figures 71 – 74/PARUR SYNAGOGUE  
VIEW OF JEW STREET, THE ENTRY PILLARS TO JEW TOWN,  
AND THE GATEHOUSE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 75 – 84/PARUR SYNAGOGUE GATEHOUSE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 85 – 94/PARUR SYNAGOGUE'S  
SECOND BUILDING (WHICH INCLUDES  
THE INSCRIPTION), BREEZEWAY, AND  
FRONT OF SANCTUARY BUILDING  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A WARONKER)



Figures 95 – 101/PARUR SYNAGOGUE *AZARA* (TOP TWO PICTURES)  
AND SANCTUARY  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER, EXCEPT BOTTOM LEFT TAKEN IN  
1985 BY TIRZA LAVI)





Figures 102 – 108/PARUR SYNAGOGUE WOMEN'S SEATING AREA (TOP LEFT),  
 OLD HECKAL (TOP RIGHT),  
 UPPER LEVEL BREEZEWAY (MIDDLE LEFT), UPSTAIRS ANTEROOM  
 (MIDDLE RIGHT),  
 COURTYARD VIEW – REAR (BOTTOM RIGHT), AND  
 SECOND BUILDING (SHOWING NOW MISSING STAIR AT RIGHT)  
 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER, EXCEPT TOP RIGHT BY TIRZA LAVI  
 AND BOTTOM LEFT BY BARBARA JOHNSON)





Figures 109 and 111/PARUR SYNAGOGUE GATEHOUSE, SANCTUARY BUILDING WITH BREEZEWAY, AND INTERIOR OF SANCTUARY (JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)

For the past few decades, the Parur Synagogue was not used as a house of prayer, and the marginally-maintained building and its property slowly yet decisively deteriorated. In recent years, its condition became so serious that there was concern for its survival. Both the Kerala Jews and sympathetic outsiders recognized that the building needed intervention for some time, yet no formal effort to save Parur Synagogue came to fruition.<sup>56</sup> The situation has recently changed. In response to strong domestic and international interest in India's synagogues, the popularity of the restored synagogue in nearby Chendamangalam in 2005/6<sup>57</sup>, and local recognition of the cultural importance of historical architecture in general, the State of Kerala with support of the government of India in 2009 embarked on a long term plan called the Miziris Heritage Site. This undertaking is being coordinated by several government divisions, particularly the Kerala Department of Tourism and Department of Archeology. It gets its name from the ancient port city, which happens to be the place where Kerala's Jews originally settled centuries ago, which will be one of the highlights of this effort of protecting or restoring forty or so natural and built sites that will be sensitively linked by existing canals, bike paths, and roadways within the central region of the State. Among these are the Parur Synagogue.

During the spring and summer months of 2009, the Kerala government negotiated with the Association of Kerala Jews to assume ownership of Parur Synagogue while the Jewish community maintains right of use. Once the detailed had been worked out, the restoration effort formally began in April 2010, and it is expected to be completed by the end of 2011. If all goes as planned, the Parur Synagogue will not only be properly restored, which will include a permanent exhibition on its history coordinated by an international team of scholars, but it will be linked with more than forty other important Kerala cultural sites, both religious and secular. The synagogue will in turn be placed into context with various centuries-old traditions and customs of the people of Kerala so as to protect and preserve the state's heritage.

## **CHAPTER 10   CHENDAMANGALAM (CHENNAMANGALAM) SYNAGOGUE**

Located twenty-five miles to the north of Mattancherry's Jew Town in Kochi, four miles to the southeast of Cranganore, and two miles from the synagogue in Parur just to the south, and reached by a narrow and busy north-south running main road (#14) linking a string of towns and villages throughout the length of Kerala is Chendamangalam (also Chennamangalam, and once referred to as Shenut and Chenot). A sleepy settlement in Paravoor Taluk in the State's Ernakulam district, it was for centuries home to a Jewish community, yet by the close of the twentieth century not a single Jew resided in Chendamangalam.

In 1324 the Arab geographer Ibn Battuta (1304-77) embarked on a ten-day expedition in Kerala from Calicut to Kaulam (Quilon) by boat along the backwaters. "On the fifth day on our journey," he wrote, "we came to Kunjakari which is on the top of a hill there; it is inhabited by Jews, who have one of their own number as their governor, and pay a poll-tax to the sultan of Kaulam. All the trees along this river are cinnamon and brazil trees. They use them for firewood in those parts" (Weil 2006, 1). The historian P.M. Jussay studied Kerala Jewish folksongs in Malayalam, and he linked Kunjakari with Chendamangalam on the basis of the summit location and the Jewish self-rule. Kunjakari has been plausibly identified with the section of the river called Kanjirapuzha to the east of the island of Chendamangalam where there was a very old Jewish settlement (Segal 1993, 10 and Weil 2006, 1).

In the Kerala Jewish Malayalam folksong "The Song of Evaray", it traces the long migration of a Jew named Evarayi from Jerusalem to visit Malanad, or another name for the land of Kerala by way of the Red Sea. Evarayi traveled through Misri (Egypt), Nemoni (likely Yemen or Eumenes on the African coast), and Porothei (Persia) to Paloor

(Palur), north of Cranganore and, according to Jewish tradition, one of the four most ancient Jewish settlements in Kerala (Timberg 1986, 147). Leaving Palur, Evarayi is welcomed on his arrival in another place called Shibushu land that is believed to be Chendamangalam (Timberg 1986, 150-51). There he set out to build a synagogue, or *palli*, and a Nayar (or Nair, a high-caste Hindu) killed a deer for a *nercca* feat to celebrate completion of his vow (Johnson 2004, 38 and Timberg 1986, 150).

According to a second Jewish Malayalam tune, that Evarayi was requested to join the local aristocratic Nayars in a local deer hunt is interpreted as signifying that the Jews were accepted as members of the nobility (Timberg 1986, 150). In "The Song of the Bird", another Kerala Jewish folksong which recounts the transmigration of a bird to India in search of a guava fruit, the bird flies "to a green mansion...in an elevated spot", which Jussay identifies with the hill at Kunjakari in Chendamangalam. This interpretation would agree with the conclusion drawn by P. Anujan Achan, the Kerala State Archaeologist of Cochin in 1930, who believed that the Jews must have migrated to Chendamangalam from Cranganore around in the mid-thirteenth century (Weil 2006, 2). A tombstone dating from 1268 belonging to a Jewish woman, inscribed in Hebrew and the oldest text in this language discovered in the region to date was restored in 1936 and can today be found just outside the front of the Chendamangalam Synagogue. According to a local narrative, the stone was brought to Chendamangalam from nearby Kottapuram (Segal 1993, 12).

In "The Song of Paliathachan", also recited by the Jewish women of Kerala, Jussay claims that the Paliath Achan, the representative of the Chendamangalam Nayar noblemen, bestowed upon the Jews "gifts and books to all those who come, and titles to foreigners" (Weil 2006, 2). Paliath Achans, or local chieftains and hereditary prime ministers of the Rajahs of Cochin, reigned in Chendamangalam until 1809. Today the chieftain's descendants remain in residence in town, although they have lost their power, wealth, and privilege. A popular legend holds that hillocks of the town were planned by

one of the tolerant Paliath Achams who sought to have four religious faiths prominently represented in town. It is said that in the center of Chendamangalam he designated a site on each of the cardinal points for the construction of a *palli*, or religious building, for four major faiths: a Hindu temple, Muslim mosque, Christian church, and Jewish synagogue. At the crossing of the axis he set his own residence, the Paliyam Palace, on a hill that is the highest point in the village at the confluence of two tributaries of the Periyar River.

The story, an appealing and romantic narrative, is only partially accurate. It is true that the construction of all four places of worship were realized by the Paliath Acham (Figures 112 - 116). It is also the case that the four structures have for centuries stood in central Chendamangalam, yet they are not neatly positioned on the four points, and the Paliath Acham's home is not neatly located at the axis. All structures do however remain close to one another and it is possible to visit each of them by foot, although they have been modified, enlarged, or rebuilt over the years. Today a walk around the quiet town reveals that these four houses of prayer were not built to this formal plan as there is no direct road or perceivable axial link from one to another. The prime minister's residence, a "high" architectural structure built in the traditional Kerala style that dates in part to the sixteenth century, was constructed not in the village center but rather on the slopes of the hill towards the edge of town. It still stands surrounded by a quiet and lush site, and today a medley of his family descendents live in the compound expanded over the years.

On top of the hill is the Hindu Krishna temple built in the vernacular Kerala style, which has been rebuilt in part in recent times (Figure 112). It is approached along an inclined path leading to an entry wall. The temple is a low-lying chunam and clay tiled collections of gabled-roofed buildings that are arranged around a courtyard. The composition may be of modest scale and understated, but the temple is on the most impressive site overlooking the countryside and town. Closeby below on the eastern slopes are cemeteries of the Jews and the Muslims placed nearly side by side and today

both overgrown and derelict. Tombstones dating as far back to the mid-thirteenth century have been identified in the Jewish part. At the foot of the hill on the northern side towards the end of a street is the mosque (Figure 113). Over the years the building, reached from the road by an inclined concrete walk with a painted steel gate, has been totally rebuilt with corner minarets and other more popular and identifiable Islamic elements. Similar to other area mosques that have undergone such radical transformations, the one in Chendamangalam, now painted lavender but previously whitewashed with green trim, now has a more generic or international aesthetic preferred by local Muslims. The mosque is located near the busy passenger and car ferry jetty linking the town with other regional places, and it is adjacent to small residences and commercial buildings.

At the other end of the same street from the mosque is the synaggoue. On the eastern part of the street lived the Muslims while on the western side stood the Jewish houses. Not far from these houses is the Christian compound. The Chendamangalam church, the largest of the village's four religious buildings, has an interesting history. In the very early thirteenth century, a Syrian Christian church was constructed in town. In 1577, Portuguese Jesuit missionaries established a presence here and built a chapel. Four years later, the chapel, named Holy Cross, was enlarged and a seminary was founded. In fear of a Dutch attack, the Jesuits fled the area in 1663, and the seminary was relocated to Amabazhakad. The original seminary buildings, however, seemed to not have been affected until 1790, when the Muslim leader Tipu Sultan from Mysore during the Anglo-Mysore War set them on fire.<sup>58</sup> Their ruins, now overgrown and picturesque, can still be seen. The adjacent Holy Cross Church, repaired or rebuilt, is still in use (Figure 114). It is a large whitewashed chunam over laterite structure with an open truss interior (Figure 116). Within the space is the original elaborate Portuguese period altar. The façade, altered in 1976, is a garish concrete composition (Figure 114). An accessory building to the rear, a rectory for the church leader, seems to date in part to a

period before Tipu Sultan's attack (Figure 115). Like the synagogue, it is a fine example of the vernacular architecture of this region with its whitewashed walls and high pitched hipped clay tile roof.

Chendamangalam is particularly well known for its inclusive town plan, and it is indeed a significant historical gesture, but it should also be noted that other Kerala towns feature a similar variety of religious buildings. In the Kottayam district of central Kerala is small city of Changanacherry, for example, and associated with it is a comparable story that the local King Marthanda Varma, a tolerant man, encouraged the building of a temple, church, and mosque within the town center.

The synagogue at Chendamangalam has been rebuilt over the centuries, yet its Kerala vernacular style was always maintained. According to narratives, the first building dated to 1420, followed by one in 1614, and then another later that same century (Segal 1993, 31 and Yehudi 1989, 97). Fire was the likely cause of the rebuilding efforts. It is possible that the Portuguese, who persecuted the area's Jews in the mid-seventeenth century and set the Paradesi Synagogue in Cochin's Jew Town on fire in 1661, were responsible for also setting the Chendamangalam Synagogue ablaze. The Portuguese period in Kerala was marked by restive activity in the Jewish community. While synagogues in Ernakulam, Parur, and Mala may have been built during this time when the Jews resettled as best as possible away from Portuguese reaches, in time the colonial power asserted itself far and wide. As a consequence, synagogues were attacked by the Portuguese and damaged or destroyed. Whether the Chendamangalam Synagogue was completely or partially destroyed at that time is not clear, but a fourth synagogue seemed to have been realized. Archeologists from Government of Kerala responsible for the restoration of the Chendamangalam Synagogue in 2005 have a slightly different opinion on the dates of the building. They believe that it was built in 1565 and repaired in 1621 (Nair 2006).

According to the Anglican Church missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, who visited Chendamangalam in 1817, he found the building in ruins (Hunt 1920, 153). From his own visits to the area, Dawson recorded that the Chendamangalam Synagogue and the one in Parur and Mala had been destroyed by the armies of Tipu Sultan during the Anglo-Mysore Wars. From 1780 – 90, Tipu Sultan and his forces had attacked and burned down thousands of non-Islamic religious structures in Kerala, including Hindu temples, churches, and synagogues. Based on Dawson's history, the Chendamangalam synagogue could not have been rebuilt before the second decade of the nineteenth century.

The Jewish community in Chendamangalam was always small, even relative to the other Kerala Jewish communities. In 1848, there were 164 Jews living in Chendamangalam out of Kerala's 1,344 Jews. By 1857, 65 Jews were observed residing there out of 1,790; by 1860, the Jewish emissary Jacob Sapir counted 30 families; in 1950, the number had increased to 46 families in the village (Segal 1993, 89). Although the current building served the needs of this community for many years, from the mid-1950s to the turn of the new century it sat mostly unused. This was so since most of the Jews moved from Chendamangalam to Israel shortly after the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, and this emigration continued albeit in diminished numbers into the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s, there were only nineteen Jews remaining in Chendamangalam (Yehudi 1989, 103). Unattended to during these years and into the 1990s by the tiny, mostly elderly congregation with limited resources and funds, the synagogue deteriorated so badly that portions of the roof and floor collapsed, large sections of the whitewashed veneer eroded, and structural integrity was severely compromised. Vegetation consumed the building, and its doors and windows had to be sealed against the elements and vandals. This was allowed to happen even though the synagogue had been declared a protected structure by the Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archeology. During this period, the synagogue often remained locked and its keys were left in the custody of P. A. Aron, a Kerala Jew who lived in Fort Kochi (Yehudi 1989, 102).



By the first years of the twenty-first century, the last of Chendamangalam's Jews had emigrated or died. Around this time, the Association of Kerala Jews came to an agreement with State of Kerala for synagogue to be transferred to the government. This allowed the Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archaeology to assume formal control of the decommissioned synagogue and embark on its much needed restoration. Although the building was off the beaten track, the government of Kerala with the encouragement of Kerala's remaining and former Jewish community and its friends around the world came to recognize the historical value of the building. Beginning in late 2004, under the direction of Dr. V. Manmadhan Nair and his Department of Archeology staff, skilled restoration professionals and craftsmen brought the building back to form. The work, costing some 40 lakhs, or about \$80,000, was funded by the State of Kerala. By that point the synagogue was in such dilapidated condition that there was concern by these experts that it could even be saved. Although the building was in a most precarious state, it was ultimately determined that the synagogue could be restored. Over the course of nearly a year, the building was lovingly brought back to form by a team of government archeologists (headed by Deepa V, the conservation engineer), the privately commissioned restoration contractor of Thampy and Thampy based in Karnataka, and a team of craftsmen and carpenters trained in vernacular building ways. During that period, the tradesmen working on project frequently slept on site, preparing their meals on the synagogue property (Nair 2006).

In 2005, with the restoration of the synagogue underway, I met with Dr. Nair at his Department of Archeology's offices in Thiruvananthapuram. Knowing there were no Jews living in Chendamangalam and realizing that the restored building would serve no official purpose, I presented to him a proposal prepared in collaboration with Dr. Shalva Weil from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Marian Sofaer of Palo Alto, California. Our joint plan called for the two story building to be readapted as India's first Jewish heritage museum. My proposal was accepted by Dr. Nair at our meeting.

For the next few months, my two associates and I, with the help of former Kerala Jews now living in Israel and funded by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life in San Francisco, coordinated all activities for this small museum. These included the writing of the exhibition text, gathering of photographs and other visual materials, collecting Chendamangalam Jewish objects for exhibition, designing and fabricating the panel boards and display stands, and the final installation. An opening ceremony, attended by many from the local village, the Kerala Jewish community, former Chendamangalam Jews and their descendants now living in Israel, a variety of international guests, and representatives of the Indian and Israeli governments, was held in late February 2006. Today the museum, managed and operated by the Kerala office of the Indian Department of Archeology and open daily except for Mondays, receives a sizeable and steady flow of guests from the area, all of India, and abroad. In July 2007, July 2009, and January 2010, through the support of the Koret Foundation of San Francisco, I returned to Chendamangalam to update and expand the museum collection.

The Chendamangalam Synagogue sits near the center of the quiet village (Figure 121). The narrow lane, paved only in recent years, leading to the synagogue seems to deadline into the building, but then it splits and continues onwards along both sides of the building. The left road is paved while the right one is red soil. In the immediate area of the synagogue are a few modest homes, several once Jewish owned, and a handful of very small shops selling a minimum of goods. In the Kerala synagogue tradition, the one at Chendamangalam is not a single building but a collection of connected pieces surrounded by a wall. The wall, high, thick, and constructed of laterite stone veneered in whitewashed chunam, is solid except for its pair of entry doors, which are entered along the latitudinal (east) side. A distinctive feature of the wall is its rounded or rolled cap, a common design element of Kerala vernacular architecture, and its applied scrolled rope design at the end (Figure 122). Engaged to the wall is a small bowl-shaped vessel used for the burning of coconut oil.

The synagogue compound can best be described as a “peninsula” arrangement where the perimeter wall aligns with the front façade of the synagogue yet frees itself of the building along the three other sides (Figures 117 and 118). It is therefore pinned in by very narrow strips of space. To the north, there is only about 11’ of space between the building and the wall, to the rear (west) there is one foot more, and along the south sides some 11’ of space divides the wall and synagogue building. Its land area is by far the smallest of all extant synagogue buildings in Kerala.

The two story steeply gabled synagogue (Figures 119 and 121) is a modest soft-edged whitewashed structure built out of laterite load-bearing walls veneered in chunam. The wall surfaces feature limited ornamentation that includes, in the Portuguese colonial Kerala, four quadrantal fan-like alettes with radiating striations at the attic and shallow pilasters with simple capitals yet no bases at the second floor. The so-called pilasters frame the three second floor windows, which consist of a rounded arched transom set atop a rectangular unit. The windows are placed deeply in the thick walls, and they are wood framed units. They contain no glass but the transom has a grid of muntins and the window below has closely spaced vertical metal bars. Bordering the three windows is a wide reveal of trim that is co-planer with the so-called pilasters. The same detail can be found around the front entry. Here there are capitals yet no bases. Also set deeply in the thick wall are the rounded arch entrance doors, which are made of solid, vertical planks of wood. In Kerala fashion, they are designed as doors within doors. The doors that fill the openings are most often locked in place, and anyone who enters the synagogue steps through a narrower and lower pair of doors with rounded arch tops. Centered well above the doors near the apex of the front gable is circular attic vent with a floral or star pattern inset. Such a detail, a vernacular Kerala feature, was influenced by Portuguese colonial architecture built in India.

The small grassy lawn now in front of the Chendamangalam Synagogue is semi-circular in shape (Figures 121 and 122). Added at the time of the restoration of the

building in 2006, the lawn contains a short dirt walkway edged by a raw chunam curb that leads from the road in front of the building to its entry. Some decades ago, a Kerala Department of Archeology sign indicating that the synagogue is a protected building was posted on a rod in front of the building, and following the restoration it was repositioned to left (south) area of the lawn. To the right (north) side of the lawn is the thirteenth century tombstone mentioned earlier. The stone marker, restored in 1936 and relocated to the synagogue property, has clearly inscribed Hebrew letters which read "*Sara bat Israel*", or Sarah the daughter of Israel. The Hebrew date corresponds to the year 1269, making it the oldest Hebrew text in India (Weil 2006, 1) (Figure 121).

Chendamangalam Synagogue's front façade contains bands of horizontally running chunam trim that separate the two levels and the attic of the sanctuary building. A slimmer line of the same type of trim also subdivides the engaged (to the north) stair tower. Resting on the band is a single rounded arch window in the same design as the three along the façade of the sanctuary building. In vernacular building fashion, the gabled roof of the Chendamangalam Synagogue is timber framed with open eaves that extend out considerably. The deep eaves, which help protect the building and its users during the monsoons and intense sun, expose the roof joints, lath strips, and underside of the clay roof tiles. According to Deepa V, the conservation engineer of the synagogue restoration project, some of the clay tiles found on the building dated from the eighteenth century, and others were inscribed with a date of 1856 (Deepa V. 2006). Whenever possible, they were reused. The roof over the stair tower is also framed in wood and covered in clay roof tiles, but it is hipped to the north side and engaged into the south side of the taller sanctuary building.

The entry into the Chendamangalam Synagogue complex is along the latitudinal (east) side. The entry doors swing inward into the porch, which is a step down from the ground level outside the synagogue (Figure 129). The floor of the covered yet unenclosed porch, measuring 14'-8" deep x 26'-10" wide, is surfaced in both granite and

terracotta pavers, and on each side of the porch is a structural, dressed granite column and base with a volute-like wooden capital. The incorporation of granite in both applications is significant. The hard stone, not in great supply in Kerala and laborious to quarry, was used sparingly in building within the region, and it speaks to how important the synagogue was to the Chendamangalam Jewish community. The two granite columns flanking the entry into the sanctuary building may support the building's second floor, yet they can also be said to recall the posts of Boaz and Jachin placed in front of the sanctuary building at Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

Distinct to the Chendamangalam Synagogue from other Keralan synagogues is its deep covered porch with a second floor room above (Figure 117). Compared to other regional Jewish houses of prayer, the front façade is nearly co-planer with the perimeter wall and stair tower – both features are set back a nominal distance from the sanctuary building (Figure 119). The Chendamangalam Synagogue breaks from the tradition of other (although not all) Kerala Jewish houses of prayer in that it also does not have a gatehouse. The building's recessed porch, although different from the two-story breezeways found or once existing at other Kerala synagogues, also serves as a transition and connecting zone.

Lining the front (east) wall in the front porch and flanking the entry portals are two built-in benches made of laterite veneered in chunam. Facing these seats, a place where its congregants could sit, rest, and socialize, is the west wall of the sanctuary building with a pair of doors in the center. These portals, reached after ascending three straight wrap around stone steps, lead to the *azara*. In Kerala vernacular fashion, they are a pair within a pair – meaning smaller (short and narrow) rounded arched doors cut into big, square-topped doors. They inner (1'-6" wide) ones are hinged to the larger pair, and when they are closed, they are co-planer and near hidden. Both set of doors are made of solid wood, and they swing into the anteroom (Figure 116). Engaged in the northeast corner of the perimeter wall, and independent of the synagogue proper, is the small

chunam-finished stair tower measuring roughly 7'-10" square, although its outside corner is broadly curved.

Chendamangalam Synagogue's *azara* measures 10'-11" x 20'-5" / 3.3 m x 6.15 m, or roughly in the same proportion as the anteroom of Solomon's Temple. Its walls are finished in chunam, its floor covered in square terracotta tiles, and the ceiling is made of wide stained wooden planks that are supported by perpendicular dropped wooden beams. Set in the walls of the *azara* are rectangular windows with wooden frame to accept shutters but no glass. The solid shutters, an upper and lower pair for each window, all swing outward. The front doors of the *azara* are flanked by a single window, the north and south walls have one window each centered, and the west wall has a pair of doors in the center with a window to each side. The room's most prominent feature is the in-relief overpanel over the doors leading to the sanctuary (Figure 131). An example of the vernacular Kerala tradition of carved wooden ornament found in buildings throughout the region, it represents the menorah and olive tress described in the Prophet Zechariah's vision. This ornament was previously painted in softer colors, yet during the 2005 restoration it was striped and repainted more brilliant, less natural hues. Below the overpanel are the decorative door surrounds with a floral and leaf design and small crown-like form in the center. While the *azara* once served a variety of purposes as already described in the thesis, today the space is used as the lobby and manager's office of the museum.

The sanctuary measures 36' x 20'-6" or 10.8 m x 6.15 m (Figures 118 and 123). In the tradition of Kerala synagogues, the space is entered under a balcony. It is 5'-0" deep and is supported by a pair of slender wooden Doric-style classical columns without bases (Figure 124). They are not only structural but frame the view into the sanctuary proper. A wood header, or entablature, the width of the balcony sits on the columns. Resting on the entablature is the balcony that is detailed with twelve perpendicular-running beams that are shaped at their ends. The ceiling of the space (the underside of

the balcony) is paneled in wood. As found in all Kerala synagogues, a steep stair is located in the northeast corner below the balcony. It is L-shaped, fabricated of wood, and features square newel posts and saw-cut flat balusters placed side by side to form a pattern (Figure 125).

Its most prominent architectural features of the sanctuary are its painted (a bright red, pale blue, and green) ceiling with a grid of small panels each with gold-leafed lotus medallions, the lyre-shaped central *tebah*, shuttered windows set in thick load-bearing walls, and a beautifully hand-carved *heckal* fabricated out of local teak and highlighted in gold, red, and green (Figures 120 and 124). At one point free-standing wooden pews and a myriad of hanging fixtures and lanterns would have decorated the interior of this fine little synagogue. These elements were set off against the whitewashed chunam walls.

The *tebah* is today fabricated out of assembled wooden pieces that have been gilded. According to Galia Hacco, a native Malabari Jew who now lives in Israel, it was once made of brass. As a result of late twentieth century vandalism, it had to be replaced, and the metal was substituted by less costly wood (Hacco 2010). A photograph of the interior of the synagogue from the early 1980s, however, shows only the wooden pieces (Figure 132). In the Kerala synagogue tradition, Chendamangalam's *tebah*, a modified circle with an 8'-1" diameter that bleeds into a "spout", is raised off the floor, but by only one riser. Other Kerala synagogue *tebot* are higher. Its design, in the pattern of other Kerala synagogues, is tiered (Figure 123). The main body is made of two rows of closely spaced lathe-turned balusters that are held into place by three 2X parallel members: one at the bottom serving as a sole plate resting on the floor of the *tebah* base, another in the middle, and the uppermost piece serving as a cap. The ends of these three horizontal members are scrolled. At the same elevation as the cap piece and engaged into it is an arced-shaped flat wooden slab that served as a table top. From this surface, the religious service was led and the *Sefer Torah* was chanted during weekday prayers. Resting on the cap, or handrail, is a graduated tiered arrangement at the western end of the *tebah*. It is

made up of three tight rows of closely spaced, lathed-turned balusters sandwiched between the handrail and three parallel 2X members stacked above. The ends of these members also are scrolled. The floor and riser face of the *tebah* is surfaced in the same terracotta tiles used throughout the sanctuary space. These square pavers, dating to the building's restoration in 2005, replaced older ones that could not be reused. As with other Kerala synagogue, the *tebah* at Chendamanagalm is surrounded by a low wooden bench. It is a simple design of a flat slab, simple feet, and no back. Child-scaled, it was here that youngsters of the congregation sat.

Engaged in the west wall of the sanctuary is the *heckal* (Figure 127). Centered between a pair of windows, it is 9'-6" wide and, following Jewish tradition is raised off the finished floor. Three risers extend the full width of the *heckal*, and they lead up to this beautiful central element. The lowest riser was partially covered over when the elevation of the finished floor was slightly altered during the 2005 restoration. The *heckal* is a stepped design: a lower large cabinet where the *Sefer* Torahs were kept, a decorative panel in the middle of the same width but shorter, and at the top a smaller element. In the decades leading up to the synagogue's restoration when the building was rarely used and largely ignored, the *heckal* deteriorated and was vandalized. Enough was intact, however, for the restoration experts to fabricate missing pieces and recreate its full glory. All Kerala synagogue *heckalot* follow a similar aesthetic, but each design varies considerably. At Chendamangalam, the *heckal* was designed with three intricately carved columns sitting on a plinth that flank each side of the cabinet doors. Similar yet shorter triple columns also frame the middle panel. The *heckal* doors (protecting the *Sefer* Torahs within the cabinet) are highly decorated, and the middle panel above contains a large vase with vines and flowers flowing out of it. At the very top of the *heckal* is crowning element. The *heckal* is gilded as well as painted bright red and green.

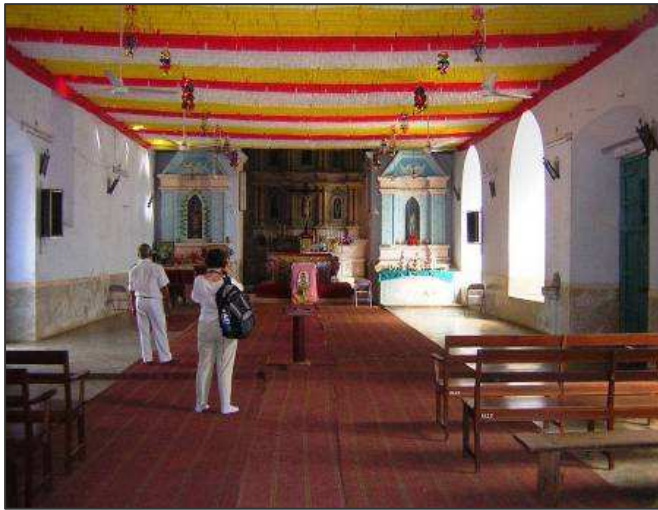
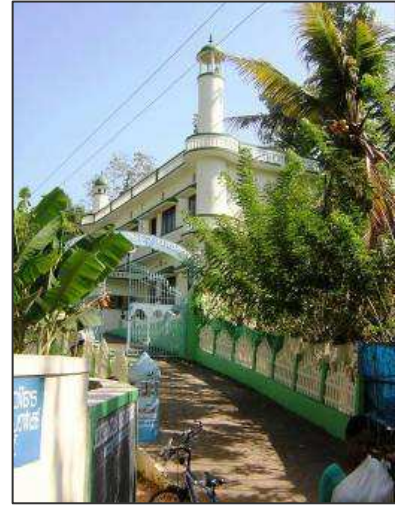
Opposite the *heckal* along the far entry wall is a stair below the balcony that leads up to the shallow second floor space (Figures 124 and 125). Centered on the guardrail,



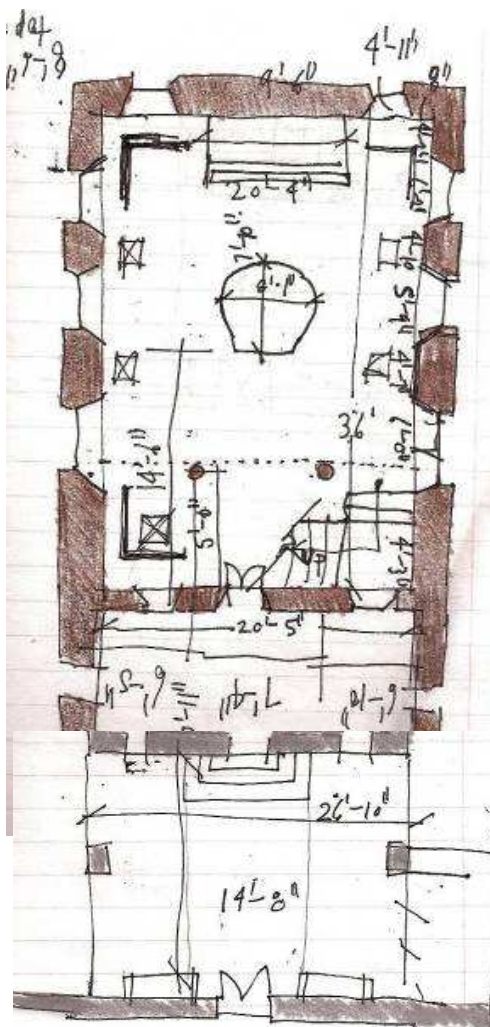
made up of gilded, lathe-turned balusters and a simple gilded wood cap, is the second *tebah*. Bowed in shape, it is accentuated by two closely spaced rows of the balusters similar to the ones of the guardrail. This railing, which demarcates the upstairs *tebah*, rests on the guardrail of a design that is much like the one found at the ground floor *tebah*. A slab of wood at the same elevation of the balcony handrail functions like a table top surface. From here, the *Sefer Torah* was read during Shabbat and holiday prayers. The floor of the balcony is made of wide, raw planks of wood running the longitudinal direction of the space, and the ceiling height here is 8'-0". Unlike some Kerala synagogues, there is no access from the balcony to the attic space above the sanctuary.

Adjacent to the balcony, in Kerala synagogue tradition, is the women's seating area. This space, measuring 11' x 20'-6", is the same size as the *azara* directly below. Separating these two spaces is the *mechitza*. It is made up of closely spaced flat saw-cut wooden pieces the same design as the stair balusters that are sandwiched between a header and sole plate to form a continuous pattern. The *mechitza* rests on a low chunam wall. Centered on the *mechitza* is a pair of solid wood doors. These doors, resting on a high threshold, swing into the women's area. The space is fitted out with a stained wood plank and dropped beam ceiling, a wide plank floor, and whitewashed chunam walls. Two windows set deep in the thick walls, one each on the north and south walls, allow natural light and ventilation into the space. The windows are wood framed and have a vertical and horizontal mullion. The upper sections are glazed and the lower ones contain closely spaced vertical metal bars. This room, where the women and often their children sat during prayers, has a ceiling that is 8'-7" high.

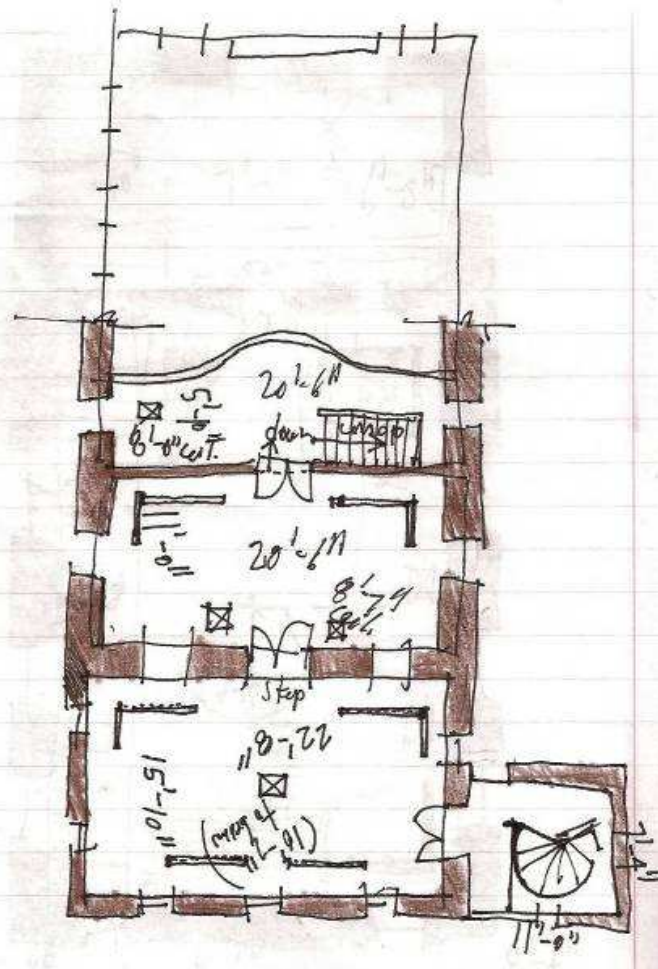
On the east partition wall of the women's seating area, flanked with a pair of openings contained solid wooden shutters, is another pair of centered solid wooden doors. They swing into the next room. Another high threshold separates this space from what was once a classroom (Figure 132). Measuring 15'-10" x 22'-8", it is above the porch



Figures 112 - 116/  
CHENDAMANGALAM RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS:  
HINDU TEMPLE AND MOSQUE (TOP); CHURCH VIEWS (MIDDLE AND  
BOTTOM)  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



FIRST FLOOR

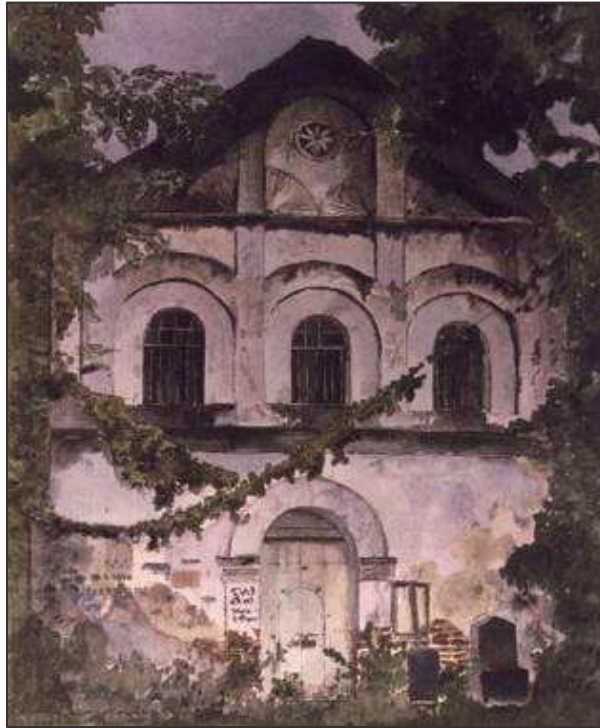


SECOND FLOOR

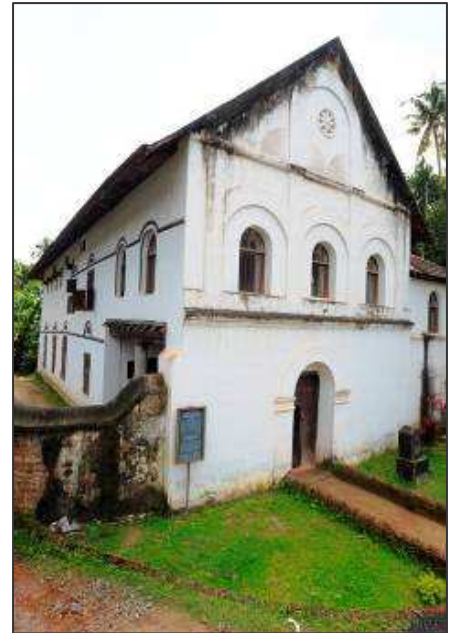
(NOT TO SCALE)

Figures 117 and 118/  
CHENDAMANGALAM SYNAGOGUE FLOOR PLANS  
(BY JAY A. WARONKER)



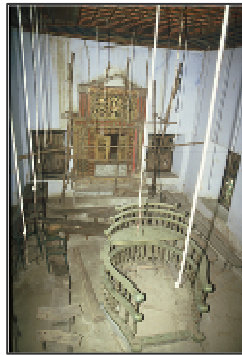
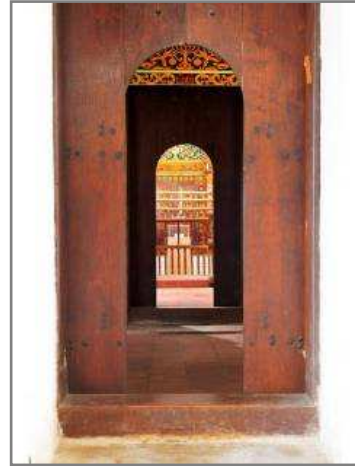
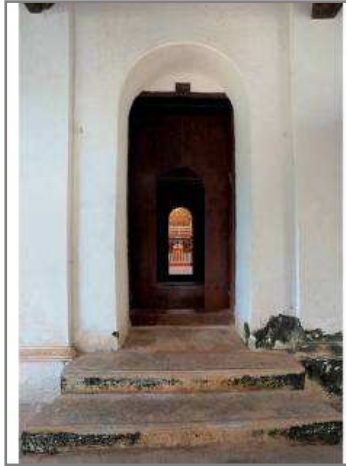
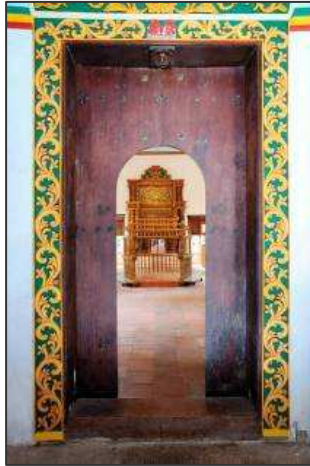


Figures 119 and 120/CHENDAMANGALAM SYNAGOGUE  
(JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)



Figures 121 – 124/CHENDAMANGALAM SYNAGOGUE  
(V. ISSAC SAM, PHOTOGRAPHER)





Figures 125 – 132/CHENDAMANGALAM SYNAGOGUE  
(V. ISSAC SAM AND JAY A. WARONKER,  
PHOTOGRAPHERS)

and fitted out with beams running in the longitudinal direction. Here, however, there is no ceiling. Looking up, one sees the attic rafters and underside of the clay roof tiles set on wooden lath strips. From here, the attic above the other parts of the sanctuary building can be accessed. The classroom's floor is surfaced in wide wooden planks running in the longitudinal direction, and the walls are of whitewashed chunam. A pair of rounded-arched topped windows are symmetrically placed within the south wall, three more line the west elevation (the front façade), and a one window alongside a pair of solid wood doors can be found on the north wall. These doors, swinging inward, lead to a very shallow breezeway that is open to the elements to the west. A wooden guardrail prevents one from falling over the side. This transition space connects to a masonry and chunam spiral stair (measuring 7'-4" x 11'-0") that leads down to the covered porch near the synagogue's main entrance. The tower and spiral stair was so badly deteriorated that it had to be completely rebuilt during the 2005 restoration.

The side and rear elevations of the synagogue at Chendamangalam (Figures 121 and 122), which rest on a low chunam base, have limited details. The most prominent is a thin band of trim in reveal painted a navy blue that runs above both the first and second floor windows. The same strip also serves as an overpanel above each window. It is segmented, and set within in an arced infill panel. Projecting from the upper floor exterior walls of the synagogue at the north and south sides are large wooden members that stabilize the structure. The roof of the sanctuary building is gabled to the front (east) façade and hipped to the rear (west). In 2006, as the restoration effort was nearing completed, a small freestanding toilet and sink were installed for visitors to the rear of the Chendamangalam Synagogue building within its walled compound. Even though the synagogue was completely restored only a few years ago, today its exterior walls, not as well maintained as they should be, are not only soiled and weathered, but they have already deteriorated, particularly at the building's base.

## **CHAPTER 11    MALA SYNAGOGUE**

The town of Mala lies in the central region of Kerala State in its Thrissur district thirteen miles to the east of Cranganore and thirty miles north of Mattancherry's Jew Town in Kochi. Along the road to Kochi are the Chendamangalam and Parur synagogues. Mala, located on a secondary road equidistant between the north-south highway #17 spanning most of western Kerala and highway #47 beginning in Kochi and running to the northeast, can today be described as a typical Kerala town with its small, low-rise commercial center that sprawls out in all directions to a mixture of detached residences, small businesses, and open spaces. While not positioned directly on water, the town is set very near the famous backwaters of Kerala that connect to the Arabian Sea.

There is a difference of opinion among sources as to when the Jews who had settled in Mala first built a synagogue, which is today the most afar Kerala synagogue from Kochi. The building was realized for an active community of Jews who are remembered by the local townspeople as productive shop owners, petty traders, or involved in agricultural work. Mosseh Pereyra de Paiva, a Dutch Jewish traveler to Kerala in 1686 who spent considerable time observing the region's Jews along with three companions, failed to mention Mala's Jewish population when he carried out his own Jewish census of the Malabar coastal area, yet the Paradesi Jew Ezekial Rahabi counted them some decades later. In his letter dating from 1767 to Tobias Boaz, a Jew in the Netherlands, he mentions fifty Jewish families in Mala (Segal 1993, 45). In a government report written in 1781, the Dutch Governor Moens included a count of Jews in Kerala, but he failed to address the ones in Mala (Segal 1993, 45). In periodic censuses taken by the Paradesi Jews throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is one specific reference to the Mala community when thirty-one families



were listed (Segal 1993, 89). The Kerala Jewish population numbers consistently went up and down in these various accounts and there were often differences among the findings from one counter to the next, yet what is clear is that Mala's Jewish congregation placed within the context of Kerala's overall community of Jews was always quite small.

Prem Doss Swami Doss Yehudi, a Dravidian Jewish historian, wrote that a Jewish Malayalam folk song only by the women reveals that the wood used for the building of the synagogue in Mala was donated to Joseph Rabban in 1000 CE by the Rajah of Cranganore on behalf of his fellow Jews. Mala was then under the sovereignty of Cranganore, and the Rajah was said to have welcomed a diversity of faiths (Yehudi 1989, 93). Today the townspeople of Mala speak about an old mosque located not far from the synagogue that was updated over the years but is now in ruins, as well a neighboring centuries-old Hindu temple (Mala townspeople 2010). Included in this triad of religious buildings was the synagogue. Yehudi also claims that the original early eleventh century synagogue was pulled down for an unknown reason and a new building was erected in 1400, and it was, in turn, renovated in 1792 (Yehudi 1989, 93). This is somewhat in conflict with the observations made by the Church of England missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, who was stationed in Cochin beginning in 1817. Dawson visited the Mala Synagogue during his tenure in the area, and his observations were accounted by W. S. Hunt:

The chief of Mr. Dawson's interests was evidently the Jews. Their condition was calculated to excite compassion. Recently decimated by smallpox, and, only a few years before, the victims of Tipu's ferocity, they were despised by the rest of the community and were, for the most part, ignorant and degraded. He visited each place in which they lived. At Parur he found them using the porch of their synagogue for their services, the rest of the building having been destroyed by Tipu; at Mala and Chankotta their synagogues were in ruins from the same cause. (Hunt 1920, 153)

Dawson seems to confirm that even after the passing of more than a quarter of a century the synagogue had yet to be rebuilt or repaired. By 1790, the Third Anglo-Mysore War marked the doom of Tipu Sultan as he had to bit by bit surrender his territories and eventually cede the kingdom of Malabar to the British authority by 1792. Based on Dawson's eyewitness of the Mala Synagogue, it was not rebuilt in 1792 but some time after his visit in 1817. This nineteenth-century structure was replaced by a new one in 1909 on the same foundation. In 1914, the Mala Jewish community sent a letter to Lady and Mr. Sassoon of London seeking a contribution for the beautification of the synagogue (Yehudi 1989, 93). The Sassoons were a Jewish dynasty who had originated in Baghdad yet, due to discrimination in the nineteenth century, had established themselves and their businesses not only in Mumbai, Pune, Kolkotta (Calcutta) but later in London, Singapore, and Shanghai.

Other sources claim that the first Mala Synagogue dates to a much later period, to 1597, after Kerala Jews had been driven away from Cranganore once and for all by the hostile Portuguese in 1565. It is the 1597 date that the Jewish scholar and historian David Solomon Sassoon wrote about in his study of the synagogues of India in the early twentieth century (Sassoon 1932, 1056). Irrespective of its date of origin, this synagogue has been altered or partially rebuilt over time, evident by an inscription in the wood carvings in Hebrew and Malayalam along the sanctuary's balcony frieze, which confirms that it and the overall space dates in full or in part only to 1909 (shown on page 183). From personal observations made during the mid-1990s and 2000s, the gatehouse and breezeway appear to be older, however, so perhaps these two sections were not rebuilt at this time but survive from an earlier period.

The former synagogue as it stands today is located at a prominent location in the center of town at a busy intersection (Figure 141). In the immediate area, a hectic place with a constant flow of vehicles, pedestrians, and animals, is a row of small shops lining the street where an assortment of products and services are sold. Running parallel to the

façade of the synagogue gatehouse, or north-south, is the paved two-lane Trichur Mala Road, and the perpendicular thoroughfare, also paved with two lanes and which dead ends directly at the gatehouse, leads eastward to the Jewish cemetery a short drive away. At one time, a great deal of real estate extending quite a distance from all sides of the synagogue was Jewish owned (Figure 136). This has all changed today, although older residents of Mala still recall the locations of the former Jewish houses and building (Mala residents 2009 and 2010). Since 1955, not a single Jew has resided in the town, and with this came the closing of the synagogue and sale of all Jewish commercial and residential property.

On December 20, 1954, just before the Mala Jewish community of some three hundred immigrated en masse to Israel in early 1955, a formal agreement was signed by the trustees of Mala Synagogue to turn over without financial benefit the ownership, use, and control of the building to the local *panchayat*, or municipality (Yehudi 1989, 93-94). Mala's departing Jews were the exception in that they had collectively arranged for their building to be deeded over for use by the broader local community. This was in contrast to other Kerala Jewish congregations, who had passed control of their synagogues to other Kerala Jews or had left the building in the hands of the skeletal community that had not made *aliya* (a Hebrew term denoting immigrating to Israel).

The legal agreement between the town and the government had a few conditions. In order for the Mala municipality to make full use of the synagogue building, the Jews stipulated that under no circumstance should it be used or converted to a place of worship of any denomination or sect, or that it become a slaughter house. The *panchayat* was also required to maintain the property and meet all charges for doing so, to place a prominent inscription in the synagogue indicating the donation of the property by the Jews, and to regularly take care of the nearby Jewish cemetery at their own expense and never use the land for any other purposes. The agreement included other details: an acknowledgement of receipt by the municipality of the keys to the building and cemetery gate, and a legal

description of both properties. Members of the Mala synagogue trustees and a representative of the *panchayat* signed the document, and it was witnessed by a Jew and non-Jew from the town (Yehudi 1989, 94-95).

Every Jew from Mala except one man moved to Israel in early 1955, and he eventually left for nearby Mattancherry (Yehudi 1989, 94). The decommissioned synagogue was converted to Mala village government offices, and it served as a venue for cultural and communal functions over the next decades. In the 1990s, however, the *panchayat* had reneged on the agreement made with Mala Jews, and legal action by the Association of Kerala Jews ensued. This dispute involved the municipality's abuse of the Jewish cemetery; they had allowed some of the property over the graves to be used as a sports field. So too had the *panchayat* failed to maintain the synagogue and its grounds. The Association of Kerala Jews was successful in stopping the desecration of the cemetery, although it remains in derelict and depressing condition today. The synagogue, mostly still standing, and its property had also not been well tended to, but the Association of Kerala Jews was less in a position to do much about the maintenance issue. Thus the keys to the building continue to remain in the possession of the *panchayat*, and all visitors must stop there to arrange access. This is in most cases easily done, and a staff member of the municipality normally accompanies the visitor to the former synagogue site. In recent years, the building has been marginally at best maintained and irregularly or rarely used if at all.

Since ownership of Mala's Synagogue passed to the municipality officially in 1955, the building and its grounds have been altered and, in part, extensively and even irrevocably compromised. While the sanctuary building has remained under the control of the *panchayat* and never sold or rented, the former synagogue gatehouse and its connecting two story breezeway were parceled off for income and converted to commercial functions. Rent from these shops was intended to go in part to the maintenance of the former synagogue sanctuary building and the nearby Jewish

cemetery, yet this has not always been the case. As a result of this arrangement, the original gatehouse entry to the synagogue complex was literally cut off from the sanctuary, forever destroying the intended spatial and experiential arrangement (Figure 139). To visit the building in recent decades, one needed to pass through voids between adjacent newer structures facing the side street (CMS Road) to the south, walk around the west side of the synagogue before coming upon the overgrown remaining walled courtyard to the north side that has for years been used for drying black pepper, and ascend up tacked-on exterior steps to unceremoniously enter the building through the sanctuary (versus through the *azara*, the intended arrival point) via a make-shift entrance. One of the windows positioned in the corner of the sanctuary had been converted into a door (Figures 137 and 138).

The original entrance to the synagogue's sanctuary building, on the longitudinal axis of the building compound, faced Trichur (Thissur) Mala Road to the east. Following the formula of Kerala synagogues, at Mala a gatehouse was erected to the far eastern end of the synagogue property. It was through this two-story structure bordering the main road in the heart of town that the formal entrance was found. The gatehouse linked to a covered yet exterior passage that connected to the sanctuary building. The sanctuary featured the usual spaces for Kerala synagogues: an *azara*, or anteroom, followed by the double-height sanctuary (Figure 133). Located roughly in the center of the space was the *tebah*, and at the far end of the sanctuary on the west wall was the *heckal*.

Soon after the Mala synagogue was transferred from the local Jewish community to the municipality, extreme changes to the building were made. Although these were in violation of the legal agreement to protect and maintain the property, the hip gabled two-story gatehouse was insensitively altered and the covered gabled breezeway shortened at its west end (Figure 140). This narrow passage continued to butt into the gatehouse to the east, but just over five feet were chopped off at the opposite side, and it no longer engaged the sanctuary building (Figure 139). The reason why this was done is not clear,

but it was likely for legal reasons. Now that the gatehouse and breezeway had been converted to commercial functions, a clear property separation from these mercantile areas and the now civic ex-sanctuary building probably made sense to the municipality's leadership.

The exposed end of the two-story passage open on the ground floor and enclosed space above was crudely filled in and sealed what appears to be concrete. The alteration to the original architecture was done in a haphazard way, resulting in an awkward and unusable gap between the former synagogue's pieces. In the tradition of other Kerala synagogues, the ground level of the breezeway was likely a covered yet open space supported by some types of columns, yet in the 1950s after the Mala Jews departed, the area was filled so it could be used as interior space. The double wooden doors that once lead into the *azara* of sanctuary building and similar ones on the second level providing access from the covered passage to the women's gallery remain, although they have for more than a half-century been sealed shut. The upper floor doors, in fact, are disconcerting since they lead to nowhere: simply outside space.

New structures with inscriptions from February 1955 were built immediately adjacent to the gatehouse to the north after the Jews departed Mala, and they severely compromised the synagogue complex. In time, low-rise structures lining CMS Road, the side street running east-west, or parallel to the north (longitudinal) elevation of the sanctuary, were erected. In the tradition of Kerala synagogue compounds surrounded by walls (freestanding ones or those of neighboring buildings), there is no physical evidence or documentation that there was a wall at the north side of the synagogue property, though there is one at the opposite (south) side. Some 35' of space exists between the sanctuary building and the property wall to the south, and 32' from the synagogue's north elevation and CMS Road. Today, instead of a wall running along the property to the west, there is a modern freestanding toilet besides a two-story commercial building. It is likely that a wall once ran here that continued along the adjacent CMS Road or in its

vicinity (perhaps before the road took its current placement), thus enclosing the entire synagogue compound. The structures facing CMS Road, built after the Mala Jews left town, blocked the view of the synagogue from the side street for some years. In 2008, these buildings were demolished by the municipality.

In 2010, the Mala *panchayat* initiated a plan to carry out modest exterior improvements on the synagogue and to tile the exterior area along the side of the sanctuary building facing CMS Road. Following the demolition in 2008 of the 1950s buildings that once stood here, the cleared space, which had become muddy and littered, was used as a parking area for cars and motorcycles. According to area shop owners, the improvement effort was to cost 4.6 million rupees, or about \$90,000 (Mala townspeople 2010). The amount, by Indian standards, seemed much too high for the amount of work planned. More a renovation versus a historically correct restoration, the *panchayat* had come to realize that the synagogue was a tourism draw. This was in response to the successful restoration of the nearby decommissioned synagogue at Chendamangalam by the Kerala office of the Department of Archeology in 2005/6 and its adaptation as India's first Jewish museum founded and planned by myself along with Dr. Shalva Weil of Israel and Marian Sofaer of the United States in 2006. Although not a part of the ambitious Muziris Heritage Project begun by the State of Kerala in 2009, which includes the restoration of the nearby Parur Synagogue as well as a number of historic secular and religious buildings and spaces in the central region of Kerala, in early 2010 the Mala municipality had hired a private contractor for the synagogue renovation. A public ceremony was held on the former synagogue's grounds in January 2010 to formally announce the effort, and work was scheduled to begin in the spring of 2010.

Although Mala Synagogue's gatehouse is still standing, it has been considerably altered and infringed upon since 1955. At some point a shallow two story addition was applied on to the front of the gatehouse, and it is this façade and not the one of the gatehouse proper that today faces the street. From the side elevation, it is easy to discern

the newer versus older sections (Figure 149). The gatehouse originally contained spaces for the caretaker and communal events, yet today it is a work area for a spice shop (Figure 151). Here some of the original wooden ceiling carvings and architectural details remain in tact and visible. The front, or post 1955, addition is part of the same business, and it serves as its sales area. The upstairs level of the gatehouse, once used as a Jewish school, has served a variety of commercial purposes since 1955 and also been compromised. In recent years it has sat vacant and in derelict condition (Figures 151 and 152). The exterior masonry and concrete stair leading up to the second level of the gatehouse to the rear of the building, squeezed between two walls, remains in tact although in a poor state of preservation. The former gatehouse also has an attic, which is reached by another exterior concrete stair adjacent to the lower level one. The attic has always served as usable space since it has windows and an open ceiling with exposed rafters. An opening was cut into the street-facing wall of the room to allow access to the flat roof of the addition in front of the gatehouse (Figure 150).

The synagogue's sanctuary building is a two and one-half story structure set on a high base: two levels of interior space with a tall attic above (Figures 137 and 138). In the traditional Kerala style, it is composed of thick laterite load bearing walls veneered in chunam. Today some of the chunam has chipped away, and the mortared stone blocks are now exposed. Over the years, there has been crude repair work on the exterior of the sanctuary, and concrete versus chunam was often substituted. A band of trim separating the first and second floor levels and the second floor and attic runs around the entire building, and there are several shallow pilasters with capitals and bases separating doors and windows or providing relief along the otherwise blank wall planes. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese colonialists had introduced pilasters, albeit more decorated ones, on the corners of their buildings in Kerala, and so this design treatment filtered into the local vernacular architecture. The sanctuary building's timber framed roof is hipped, with deep 30" overhangs and open soffits supported by broadly



spaced narrow metal brackets. Along the short ends of the building, there are four of these brackets, and at the long ends there are six.

Since the building has been neglected over the years, sections of the roof along its overhangs are in derelict condition, and the roof noticeably sags. Clay mangalori roof tiles were used, and today some are missing or cracked. To the east, the roof is gabled to accept the breezeway, while to the west it is hipped. Tall windows with transoms at the ground floor are set into the thick walls. They do not align with the building's base but "float." Although the windows are rectangular, they are set in openings that feature arched tops, and the sprandel panel between the head of the windows and the arches is finished in chunam. Just above these arches is a meandering band of decorative chunam trim in relief which follows the curved line of the window opening then forms the capitals of the engaged pilasters flanking the windows before it arches one again either above the next window or as a repetitive design element along blank wall surfaces (Figure 137). Each ground floor window is covered by a rectangular shed awning made of a wood frame covered in clay roof tiles. Photographs of the synagogue around the time the Jews left in 1955 show these same window canopies in place (Association of Kerala Jews collection).

At the second floor, two solid, painted wooden windows along each of the north, south, and east elevations are also set into the thick chunam and laterite walls, although these openings have flat (square) tops. The upper floor of the east elevation also contains a pair of doors that once connected to the breezeway, and the west elevation's second level is blank aside from the decorative engaged pilasters. On both the north and south sides of the second floor of the sanctuary buildings are four irregularly shaped wooden members projecting from the wall surface. There is no apparent reason why they are there since the beams supporting the ceiling of the prayer space are dummies carrying very little load, and hence there is no need for them to project out from the load bearing laterite and chunam walls. There could have once been a design feature requiring these

exposed members, but today nothing is clear (Figure 137). These same projections can be seen at the Parur and Chendamangalam Synagogues.

At the level of the attic, large rectangular vents can be found. There are two each at the short ends of the building and four along the longitudinal sides. Over the years, the exterior of the synagogue at Mala has been painted various color schemes. Today it features a rust colored base (that is mostly 83” high yet it does not align along all sides), yellow-orange at the first floor (about 105” high), and a whitewashed finish with pale blue admixtures added along the second level (approximately 120” high) and attic (around 60” high). The building is currently inadequately maintained, so its exterior surfaces are badly stained, weathered, and deteriorated in places (Figure 138).

Typical to all Kerala Jewish houses of prayer, the one at Mala features two rectangular spaces on the ground floor: the *azara*, or anteroom, and the double height prayer hall (Figures 133, 142, 143, and 144). On the second floor, a shallow gallery overlooking the double-height prayer hall and a women’s seating area directly above the *azara* can be found (Figure 147). For some decades as a result of changes to the original entry sequence, the entrance to the sanctuary building has been along the south (longitudinal) elevation towards the southeast corner of prayer room. While the original transom made up of lathe-turned wood balusters was left in tact, the double window was removed and a solid painted wooden door with two raised panels alongside a fixed painted wooden shutter with six raised panels was added. Six concrete stairs to the outside of the building were added to provide a makeshift way of getting into the sanctuary building (Figure 137).

The Mala Synagogue *azara* is a rectangular space measuring 23’-1” long x 11’-10” wide, or nearly in the 2: 1 ratio (Figure 142). This is the same length to width ratio found in the anteroom of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem as described in the Hebrew Bible. The *azara*’s ceiling is 11’-4” high (or approximately a 2:1:1 proportion) and made of stained wood planks and dropped wooden beams. Now hanging from the ceiling are

fluorescent lighting fixtures with exposed bulbs and two aluminum ceiling fans. The room contains a pair of solid wood entry doors centered along the east wall that swing into the space. These are the doors that originally provided a way into the anteroom from the exterior covered passage. On the opposite wall is another pair of solid, painted wooden doors fabricated of very wide vertical planks, which swing into the prayer hall. All surfaces of these doors, including the iron hinges and hardware, are now painted bright blue. Within the pair of doors, which measures about 5'-0" wide altogether, is another narrow pair of doors with arched tops. Here, in Kerala tradition, one finds doors within doors, and it is the inner pair that most often used while the outer ones, albeit operable, remain closed. The door opening rest on a saddle and step, and flanking the doors are matching windows set into the thick wall partition.

The *azara's* symmetrical east and west elevations contain windows with a combination of painted wood, iron bars, and glass. Similar window openings are placed centered along the short (north and south) ends of the room. The 69" high openings are 12.5" off the floor, and they have a fixed transom with fixed closely-space vertical lathe-turned, painted wooden balusters and two openings below containing horizontal iron bars. As mentioned in the earlier chapter on the aesthetic of Keralan architecture, the design of these window screening devices was inspired by earlier Portuguese colonial work in Kerala. Behind these balusters and bars is a pair of solid painted wood shutters that swing outward. When they are opened on the three sides of the buildings, natural light fills the space and it becomes cross ventilated. Up until the 1960s, Mala's synagogue was not electrified. The *azara's* walls, approximately 23" thick at the three exterior walls and 18" thick at the interior partition, are veneered in chunam over laterite stone. The lower section of the walls, approximately 5'-5" in height off the floor, are now rust colored, and the upper wall area from the top of the wainscot to the ceiling is whitewashed. A myriad of exposed electrical wires and panel boxes now line the room's walls. The *azara's* floor is finished in tightly laid square terracotta tiles.

Adjacent to the *azara*, and to the west (towards Jerusalem) is Mala's prayer hall (Figures 143 and 144). At the doors separating the two spaces, one steps up on a riser and back down. The rectangular room measures 41'-0" long x 23'-1" wide, and the ceiling is 19'-8" high. The walls of the room are also finished in chunam that have over the years been painted are today a rust color at the lower section and whitewashed at the upper section continuing to the ceiling. The sanctuary's floor is covered with terracotta tiles that are mostly consistently sized and orthogonally patterned, yet in the southeast corner irregular paver sizes in a hodgepodge pattern are used. The sanctuary's ceiling is not coffered or carved as at most Kerala synagogues but is more simply finished with wide wood planks running in the longitudinal direction and spaced beams spanning the opposite way. Both the planks and beams along with a handful of immediate purlins set between the beams in the center of the sanctuary are today painted a bright blue. Hanging iron rods that once supported ceiling hung lighting fixtures that are now missing can still be seen throughout the space.

In the tradition of all other Kerala synagogues, the prayer room is fitted out with a matching pair of thin columns that symmetrically flank the entry into the space and frame the view from the *azara* to the central *tebah* and *heckal* to the far end. They are lathe-turned and profiled single pieces of wood that support the gallery. These columns, thinner and less shapely than the ones in other buildings (where they may contain striated rings), are today painted a bold pink are not full height but rest on rectangular rust-colored concrete pedestals that appear to have been added later. The columns at Parur Synagogue are placed 5'-6" on center off the interior partition wall and 6'-9" on center on center from either the north and south exterior walls. They support the balcony, which is fabricated of wood that is in some places stained and other areas painted a bright blue. The underside of the balcony, which includes the bowed upper *tebah*, is finished in stained wood that features a pattern of carved out lotus flowers, other floral elements, and engaged wooden members and corbels with scrolled ends (Figure 143).

One can deduce that this building was once a synagogue from the wooden frieze along the face of the balcony overlooking the sanctuary (Figure 134). Carved in the wood is an inscription in both Hebrew (to the left when facing) and Malayalam (to the right) indicating 1909 as the date of the space. The frieze is today painted white and bordered in a blue green paint. These carvings and adjacent wooden brackets are examples of the decorative traditions of Kerala architecture. The underside of the frieze is embellished with sixteen carved wood lotus flowers, and the pattern is interrupted only by the symmetrically placed twin columns supporting the balcony. Otherwise, there is little remaining to reveal that this was once a synagogue.

Although the sanctuary was intact when the Mala Jews turned over control of synagogue to the municipality in late 1954 just before the time of their departure, the ground floor *tebah* is gone as well as the *heckal* and all furnishings and lighting fixtures. It is not clear what happened to these objects, and they are today presumed lost. Examining the west wall of the sanctuary, there is not even a trace or mark where the *heckal* once stood. Engaged in the west wall where the *heckal* was placed is a raised painted concrete platform that measures 8'-1" deep x 15'-5" wide x 18" high (Figure 143). This stage, accessed by two 11" deep treads at both ends, was added by the *panchayat* after they assumed control over the building (page 186). It apparently was to be used for events and performances.

While many pieces of the former synagogue are now missing, the steep stair leading up the gallery is, however, still intact, as well as its guardrail and the bowed second *tebah* centered along the railing. The stair is an open riser design (16 risers) that is 3'-0" wide and made of concrete (the first four risers before the stair turns 45°) and wood that has been painted a bright blue color. The L-shaped stair, which projects from the east wall 7'-0", features a landing engaged in the northeast corner of the prayer hall.

A black granite inscription can be found inset midway in the north wall of the prayer room which accounts the transfer of the synagogue to the municipality in 1955. It reads:

Jewish Synagogue  
Donors: Ernakulathukaran Avorony s/o Mosha  
Pallivathukkal Eliacha s/o Kunjeli  
Chennamangalathukaran Eliabais s/o Aphrian  
Trustees of the Synagogue  
Donee: Athapilly Joseph s/o Devassy  
President Mala Panchayat For and On  
Be Half of Mala Panchayat  
This Deed Regd: And Handed Over to  
Mala Panchayat on 4.1.1955

Elsewhere in the former sanctuary space are exposed modern electrical lines with fluorescent fixtures, sconces, and switches lining the walls and a pair of metal ceiling fans now hang from the ceiling. Otherwise the former prayer space, now dirty, is empty except for a porcelain sink added at some point in the in the southeast corner of the room and some odd furniture not original to the synagogue (Figure 144).

The steep corner stair leads up to the balcony, which over the years has been minimally altered or compromised. There is a 36" x 63" cutout in the balcony floor to allow for the ladder-like stair. This opening is 34" off the north wall and 13" from the east wall, and it is surrounded on three sides by the wooden handrail made of square balusters, a flat cap rail, and newel posts with bunion caps that have all been painted a bright blue. The shallow balcony overlooking the sanctuary measures 7'-1" wide x 22'-6" long x 10'-6" high (Figure 147). Its ceiling is finished in wide pieces of wood, and the floor is finished in 10.5" wide raw wood planks. The overall thickness of the balcony floor is 5.5". When facing the sanctuary from the balcony, and since the sanctuary is not as high as the balcony ceiling, a 3'-3" high dropped wall is visible. It is at this soffit that access to the attic is possible through an opening at the far south end. A fixed steep

wooden ladder that is 26” wide and with ten rungs provides access to the generous attic space. A look inside reveals the timber framing with wooden tie beams, underside of the clay roof tiles set on wooden lath strips, raw laterite block walls punctured periodically with large louvered vents, and a wide wood plank floor. In the tradition of Kerala synagogues, the attic was used as a *geniza*, or temporary storage place for decommissioned ritual objects before they were ceremoniously buried.

The wooden guardrail along the edge of the balcony is still mostly in tact, although several of the lathe-turned balusters are missing and thin replacement rods stand in their places or there are now gaps (Figure 147). The closely spaced and highly profiled stained balusters were an earlier Portuguese influence, and similar ones can be found throughout Kerala and in Goa. The guardrail, which engages in both (north and south) end walls, is 37” high and divided into two sections of balusters sandwiched between three horizontal runs of 2 x 4s that are painted bright blue. It rests on a wooden base about 6” high painted in the same color. In the center of the guardrail is the second *tebah* that bows out into the double height sanctuary space. The *tebah* features an arced slab of wood measuring 46.5” wide, 14” deep at its center, and 37” high.

At the ends of the balcony (north and south elevations) are matching windows set in the thick walls. Measuring 5’-9” high with their sills 26” off the finished floor, they are divided horizontally into two sections. The one on the bottom contains fixed and closely spaced lathe-turned wooden balusters painted a bright blue (another Portuguese colonial influence) set in front of french shutters made of solid wood panels also painted the same blue. A simple pin latch keeps them closed, and they open outward. The upper panel features a center mullion that separates two bright blue painted wooden shutters with the same latches.

The east elevation of the balcony is the *mechitza*, or screen wall that separates the balcony and men’s prayer space on the ground floor from the women’s seating area (Figure 135). It is set on a 4’-0” high and 24” thick solid wall made of a chunam veneer

over laterite stone. The 6'-6" high screen is composed of both closely lathe-turned balusters that have been stained and framed or held in place by 2 x 4 members or saw cut flat wood shaped pieces that have been assembled side to side to create a pattern of solid to void. The result is a screen in the tradition of the *jali*, an Indian architectural element, yet made of painted wood drawing from Keralan construction traditions then fused with Portuguese colonial design characteristics in the way that it was designed. Mid-way in the *mechitza* is a narrow pair of painted flat-panel wooden doors that are hung from a painted wood frame. They swing into the women's seating area (Figure 146). A high threshold needs to be crossed before entering the space where women with their children congregated for prayer. The room, measuring 11'-6" wide x 23'-0" long x 10'-5" high and positioned directly over the *azara*, is finished similarly to other spaces in the synagogue: chunam walls, ceiling of stained wood planks and dropped beams, and wide raw wood planks on the floor. At some point a modern aluminum ceiling fan and small lighting fixtures hanging from the beams were added, and windows matching the ones in the balcony space bring light and air into the women's area.

In the women's seating area, there is a single window along the north and south walls and two windows at the east elevation. This pair of windows flanks a set of centered doors, and these are the portals that once led to the second level of the breezeway. Each window is 5'-4" high, 3'-0" wide including the frame, and with a sill height of 2'-2" above the finished floor. The walls of the women's seating area are whitewashed at the bottom section and rust-colored at the upper area. Electrical lines running from the ceiling fixtures are exposed along the north elevation, and these wires connect to a electrical box mounted on that wall. Otherwise, the women's seating area, which once contained bench seating, is today empty.

The solid and painted doors intended to lead from the women's seating area to the breezeway are still in place, but the west end of the breezeway was crudely sliced away in the 1950s (Figure 148). Should one open these now-sealed doors today, there is a five



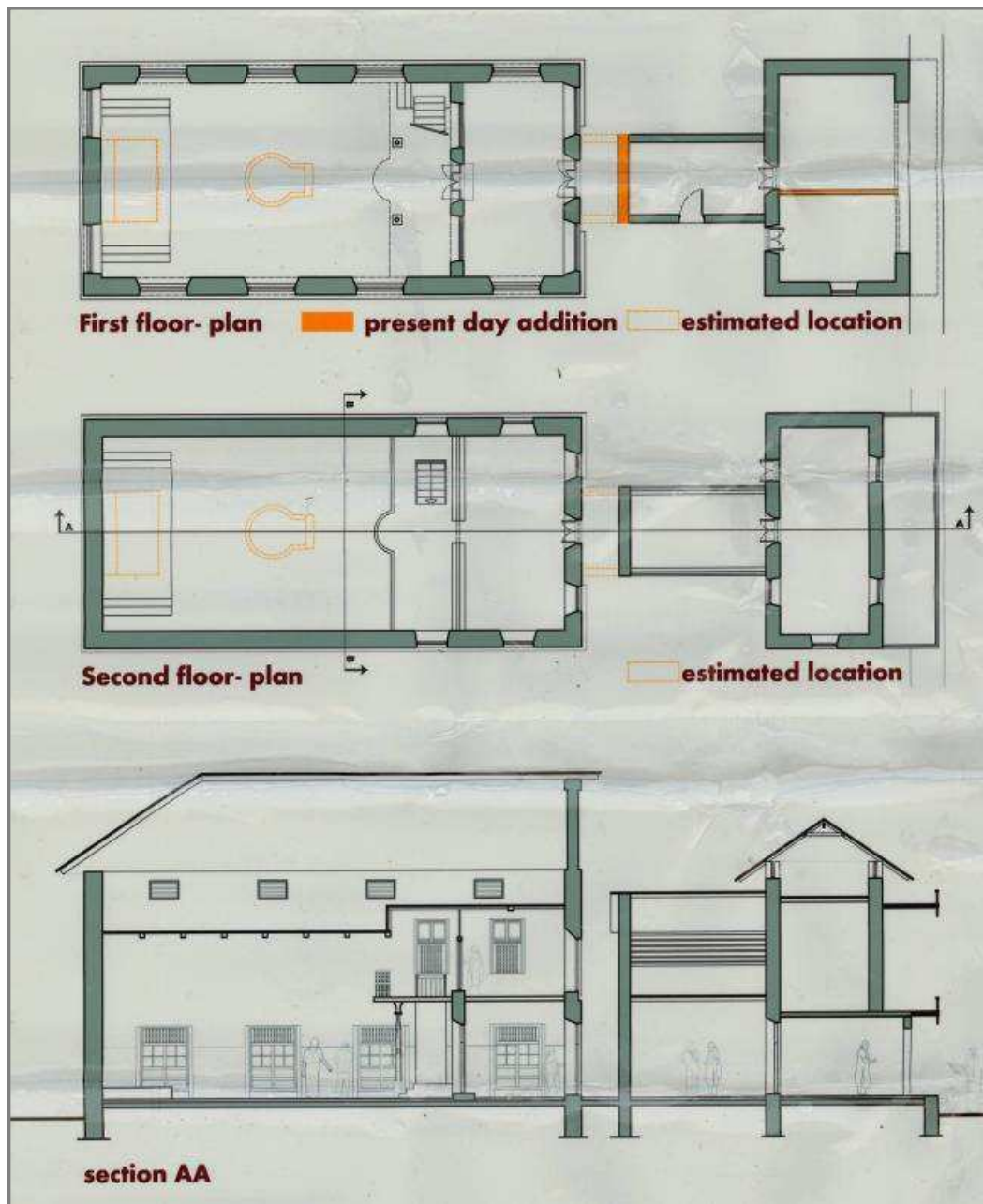


Figure 133/MALA SYNAGOGUE MEASURED DRAWINGS  
(PROVIDED BY AVI CHI)

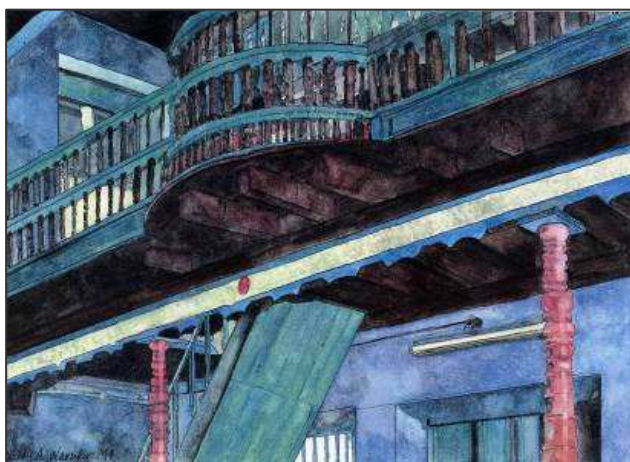


Figure 134/MALA SYNAGOGUE  
(JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)

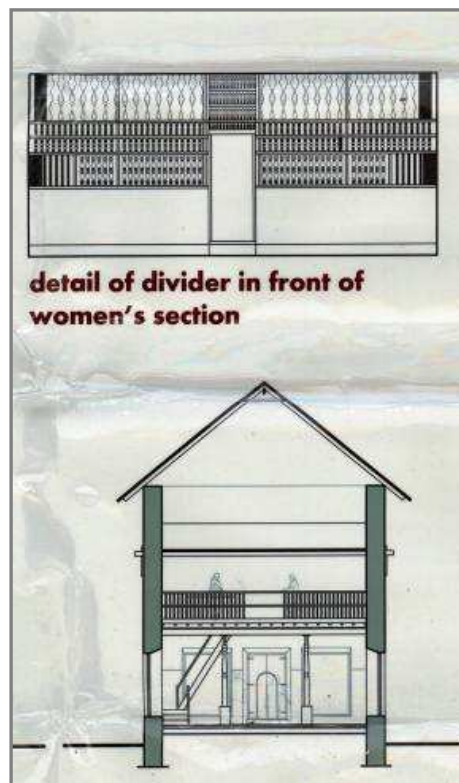


Figure 135/MALA SYNAGOGUE  
(BY AVI CHAI)

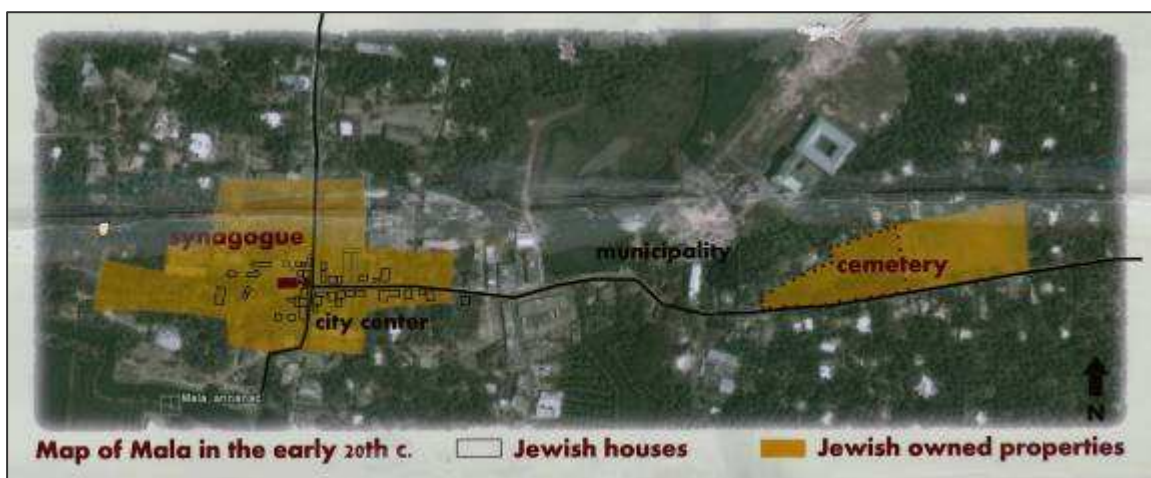


Figure 136/MALA AREA PLAN  
(BY AVI CHAI)





Figures 137 - 141/MALA SYNAGOGUE  
SANCTUARY BUILDING,  
BREEZEWAY, AND GATEHOUSE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



Figures 142 – 147/MALA SYNAGOGUE AZARA, SANCTUARY,  
BALCONY WITH SECOND TEBAH, AND WOMEN'S SEATING AREA  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)





Figures 148 – 152/MALA SYNAGOGUE BREEZEWAY AND GATEHOUSE  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER AND V. ISSAC SAM)

foot gap, so access to the breezeway is impossible. It is possible, however, to access the second floor of the breezeway through an exterior space to the far, or northeast corner of the space. This constricted concrete stair, today walled in by adjacent structures and in derelict condition, leads up to a tight second floor landing without any guardrail. To the south is a pair of wooden doors that swing into the breezeway. In its altered state, the space measures 8'-7" wide x 21'-4" long, although the original length is estimated to be nearly 27'. At its highest point along the center ridge the space with its sloped ceiling is 11'-1" high.

Mala Synagogue's breezeway is a quintessential example of Kerala timber vernacular architecture with its beautifully ventilated and diffusely lit "walls" made of struts with a latticework of interlinking laths (Figure 148). The lower structure of the pent roof meet the curved or arced struts, between which run ranks of laths, giving a venetian blind effect. This system of shaped and bowed struts and laths forms the lattice walls of the breezeway designed to permit the filtering of light and air into the long and narrow space. Each strut links to an intermittently spaced vertical purlin resting on a 43" high knee wall veneered in chunam. The purlins connect to a header which supports the wood framed roof covered in clay tiles. In some cases throughout Kerala, this intricate architectural wall system was painted, but at Mala Synagogue the wood has been left raw. So too has the wide-planked wooden floor of the breezeway.

The east end of the breezeway connects to the upper floor spaces of the former synagogue gatehouse. A pair of wooden doors separating these two spaces swings in the first room, which measures 12'-4" wide x 25'-4" long (Figure 151). The ceiling, finished in wood with exposed dropped beams, is 9'-7" high. The 15" thick walls of the space are finished in chunam over laterite. The south wall is solid, the west one has doors in the center that are flanked by a window to the south and a pair of solid doors to the north (that lead to the exterior landing and stair), the north wall has one centered window, and

at the east wall features two openings flanking a pair of inward swinging doors providing access to a second space. This front facing room, which is located in the later addition and never a part of the gatehouse proper, overlooks the busy street. This space was added in 1956 after the Mala Jewish community deeded over the sanctuary and departed from town. It measures 6'-7" wide x 9'-7" long x 8'-7" high. The ceiling, finished in plaster, is 8'-7" off the finished floor. Although the windows have been altered over the years, today there is one at the south wall, two wide units flanking a central pair of door at the east (street facing) elevation, and along the north wall. Just off the north wall is a cutout in the floor measuring 28" x 48" to allow for the steep wooden stair. Never part of the original gatehouse, this stair connected the two levels. Today the two rooms on the second floor of the gatehouse have been much altered and not well maintained over the years. The second floor room of the synagogue gatehouse once served as classroom space for a Jewish school (Figure 152). Both the old and new spaces were used as temporary classrooms for school children in Mala until a new building was completed by the municipality a few years after the Jews departed and deeded over the synagogue building (Mala townspeople 2010).

## CHAPTER 12 PARADESI SYNAGOGUE

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For centuries, Kochi's Mattancherry was a vibrant center for Jewish life with its three synagogues lining Synagogue Lane in Jew Town alongside Jewish schools, homes, and places of businesses. Hundreds of Jews lived, worked, prayed, were educated, played, socialized, and celebrated life-cycle and holiday events here, representing one of India's and the world's true centers of Jewish existence (Figure 160). Although this small area of Kochi has never been exclusively Jewish as Muslims mixed with Hindus and Christians have lived here as well, it was indeed a Jewish enclave by choice where its people existed side by side and interacted on a regular basis. Yet these Jews were never a homogenous community, but rather made up of individuals of distinct cultural and social backgrounds who arrived in Kerala at different periods and from disparate places. They may have all have shared a religion and certain common interests, but they never spoke from a single voice or existed as one communal people. This can be confirmed by fact that they in time built three distinct synagogues all located within a short walk.

Today it is difficult to imagine Mattancherry as home to such an active Jewish community. When a commission made up of Mosseh (Pedro) Pereyra de Paiva and three Jewish companions were by the Jewish community of Amsterdam to Kerala in November 1686, they observed that "the place where they live is a very pleasant one...above the river, the houses are passable, all living in one street in which their herub is fixed with two pillars of stone crossed by an iron bar. In brief, they live under a fig tress as their fathers did in the Holy Land" (Segal 1993, 44 and Timberg 1986, 121).<sup>59</sup> In a letter to the Amsterdam Jewish community ten years earlier, the Paradesi Jew David Rahabi had estimated the White Jewish community of Jew Town to be 25 families. Pereyra did not



mention of a specific number of White Jews, but he did note that there were 120 Black Jewish families in Mattancherry. The Paradesi Jew Ezekiel Rahabi, in a letter to the Dutch Jew Tobias Boaz dating from 1767, estimated that there were 25 White Jewish in Mattancherry and 130 Black Jewish families residing in Kochi. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Paradesi Jews periodically conducted a Jewish census of Kochi. In 1807, they observed 210 White Jews, 150 Black Jews, and 50 Brown Jews in Mattancherry. In the same area by 1848, there were 190 White Jews, 90 Brown Jews, and 226 Black Jews. These numbers were fairly consistent during the first decades of the twentieth century (Segal 1993, 89).

Where these figures give evidence to a substantial albeit always relatively small Jewish community living in Mattancherry on Jew Street (also known as Synagogue Lane) or on adjacent small roads, in the spring of 2010, following the death of life-long Paradesi member Sammy Hallegua some months prior, the Jewish population of the area was down to only ten, and all of them from the Paradesi community: Sammy's Hallegua's wife Queenie, Sarah Cohen, Johnnie and Juliet Hallegua, their daughter Yaeal, Keith Hallegua, Gummy and Reema Salem, Isaac Ashkenazi, and Rachel Hallegua. Of the ten, seven were eighty years of age or older. Some of the younger members had thoughts of leaving, staying in Jew Town only because of sagging real-estate prices or for professional or personal obligations. Of the three synagogues that once prospered within a stone's throw of one another, only the Paradesi still functions as a Jewish house of prayer. Shabbat services requiring a *minyan* (quorum) of ten Jews continue to be held, made up of the small remaining community that often required to be augmented by visiting travelers.

Since Jews have a tradition of dispersion throughout their long history, the changes in Mattancherry, albeit sad to many, are typical. In late 2009, a young *Chabad* rabbi and his wife arrived in Kochi, and through their energetic efforts the small community has experienced some rejuvenation. Shabbat services at the Paradesi

Synagogue, led by the new rabbi, now more easily attracted a *minyan*. Yet the synagogue's busiest activity continues to be as tourist destination. On a daily, except for Friday afternoons and Saturday during Shabbat, a seemingly endless flow of visitors of all walks and persuasions from Kerala, the rest of India, and the entire world flock into Jew Town by ferry, private car, auto-rickshaw, bike, or foot, and make the short journey down Synagogue Lane to the synagogue, pay a small entry fee of ten rupees, or about 20 US cents, tour the compound on their own in a handful of minutes (in years past a community member served as guide, but with the aging and diminished demographics, a few years ago this stopped and a non-Jew was hired to handle tickets sale but little else), and then depart in reverse along Jew Street back to their awaiting transportation.

After visiting the synagogue, most tourists cannot resist the temptation to shop, and they frequently stop in one or more of the many curio, souvenir, or antique shops that line Jew Street and neighboring roads, the majority of them owned by Kashmiri merchants from northernmost India. Many of the buildings located along these narrow lanes were once owned by Jews and served as their homes and places of business. While tourist shops have been a part of Mattancherry for some decades, in recent years their number has grown expeditiously. Consequently, by the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century the area felt very much like a tourist trap. It was difficult if not impossible to pass through without constantly being approached by polite albeit aggressive shop operators for a quick and "free" look inside. In marked contrast, it is the few Jews remaining in the area that were regularly besieged by curious tourists eager to learn something about Mattancherry's old Jewish community. As a result, the local Jews have for years felt as if they were constantly on display. Routinely, amateur historians, writers, and photographers have sought to capture, record, and promote the "discovery" of these exotic creatures threatened by extinction. Many of the every day travelers, particularly the Jewish ones, also feel inclined to knock unannounced on the door of a Jewish home. What accounts for their overly curious if not aggressive behavior is a topic

of human nature awaiting study. Annoyed, bemused, or scared off by this incessant attention, some of the Mattancherry Jews long ago retreated and others became hardened, unsociable, or blatantly inhospitable to outsiders.

Not so many years ago, initiated by community leader Sammy Hallegua, the Paradesi Synagogue banned photography altogether. Even more recently, due to the rising threat of international terrorism, a uniformed policeman was assigned to the site and can today be found positioned on the street just outside the synagogue. For anyone old enough to recall Jew Town in its completely or even partially authentic glory or before it was placed so prominently on the tourism map, the small area now seems artificial, orchestrated, and forever changed.

To serve the needs of the Paradesi Jews who had grown substantially in numbers by the mid-1560s and were in need of a house of prayer, in 1568 the Paradesi Synagogue was constructed in the Mattancherry area of Kochi by Samuel Castiel, David Belilia, Ephraim Sala, and Joseph Levi (Timberg: 1986, 139). The road that it was built on came to be known as Jew Street or Synagogue Lane, and the area as Jew Town. The Rajah of Cochin generously allotted them land in Cochin da Cima, or Upper Cochin, next to his own palace (now a city museum) and an adjacent small conical-shaped Hindu temple built to service himself and his royal family (Figure 158). By this point the membership of the Paradesi community consisted of a core that had migrated from Cranganore then supplemented by a larger group who were relative newcomers from Western Asia and Europe. This influx to membership of the synagogue gave it the name of Paradesi, or the Foreigners' Synagogue.

Mosseh Pereyra de Paiva, the Dutch Jew already mentioned who visited Kochi in 1686, declared that “the Spanish Jews came to Cochin in the year 1512 in which place they settled down with their synagogue which is the one they have today” (Israel 1989, 42). Pereyra, repeating the opinion of his own day, was not wholly accurate since the Paradesi Synagogue was not founded until 1568. Yet it must have received its name of

“Foreigners” from the large accession of foreign members who arrived in Cochin in the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>60</sup> Letters from Jesuits in South India make reference to Jews arriving from Turkey and Persia who most likely had originated in Spain and Portugal after they had been thrown out in 1492 and 1497 respectively (Segal 1993, 21). Other of these expelled Jews had passed through current-day Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Barbary (Berbaria) (Segal 1993, 47 and Timberg 1986, 137).

In about 1570, according to J. B. Segal, shortly after the final Jewish exodus from Cranganore in 1565-6, a Yemenite poet and traveler, Zecharia ben Sa’adya al-Dahiri, reported on his visit to Kochi. He found there a congregation of Sephardim, presumably the White Jews of the Paradesi Synagogue, and other communities of converts and freed slaves who practiced Judaism (Timberg 1986, 73). A cordial relationship between the Kochi Jews and their neighbors as well as the Rajah of Cochin is also documented by the Dutch traveler Van Linschoten, who visited the area in 1589 (Timberg 1986, 73).

Though the Paradesi Jewish community had the protection and friendship of the Rajah of Cochin, they were still exposed to the enmity of the Portuguese, who established a trading post in what was to become known as Fort Cochin. Ultimately the Portuguese made yet another attack on the Jews in 1662 after they had sided with the Dutch in a skirmish for control over local territory. Beginning in 1661, the Dutch challenged the Portuguese for the European supremacy in Kerala, using as a pretext a quarrel between two rivals for the throne of Cochin. In February 1661, the Dutch took the fortress at Palliport near Cranganore. In December of the same year they captured Quilon, and a month later Cranganore fell into their hands. They next laid siege to Kochi. The Portuguese, however, defended the Fort bravely, and in March 1662, the Dutch withdrew for Ceylon, leaving only a garrison on Vypin Island in Cochin Harbor (Segal 1993, 38). With the Dutch defeat, the Portuguese took revenge on the Jews since they had sided against them. The Paradesi Synagogue, a building located within a few miles from Fort Cochin and an obvious symbol of the local Jewish community, was set on fire and

partially destroyed, the Rajah being powerless to stop the mighty colonial forces. It is believed that other areas Kerala synagogues were attacked and damaged by the Portuguese forces. The Jews gained security again once the Dutch were finally able to oust the Portuguese in 1665 and take control for the next one hundred and thirty years. The Paradesi Synagogue, which had been in derelict condition during the period of Portuguese hegemony, was then repaired.

With the arrival of the Dutch in Kochi, an era of religious liberty, peace, and unparalleled prosperity began for all Kerala Jews, but particularly for the Paradesi community. Officers of the Dutch East India Company regarded the Paradesi Jews with benevolent if not economic interest, and Kochi at this time had become an important and thriving port city more flourishing than Goa which remained under Portuguese control. Under the Dutch, the Jews were now free to engage in occupations that had been off limits to them under Portuguese domination. They are free to move around without restraint. The local rajahs maintained cordial relations with them and continued to grant those privileges which had been conferred on Joseph Rabban by the medieval copper plates centuries earlier (Figure 3). The Jews, according to the Dutch official Stavorinus, were given “free permission (granted by the Rajahs and sanctioned by the Dutch) to exercise their religion without restraint” (Segal 1993, 47). During the Dutch colonial period, the Paradesi Synagogue became the most magnificent of the houses of prayer of the Kerala Jews. Rabbi d’Beth Hillel described it as “so fine perhaps not existing in any parts of Europe and Turkey that I have traveled hitherto” (Segal 1993, 48). It has even been called the Taj Mahal of Indian Jewry (Segal 1993, 48).

Today the Paradesi Synagogue is the oldest functioning Jewish house of prayer not only in this area of India but in the whole country and the rest of the British Commonwealth. For this reason, and since it is located in easy access of Indian and international tourists visiting Kochi each year, for decades it has been the star, the popular and attractive sibling, among the mostly unknown and dull family of seven

synagogues. It is made up of a grouping of white washed and brightly-painted thick-walled chunam over laterite stone structures with moderately to steeply pitched roofs with deep eaves (to avoid damage from the annual monsoons), wooden lattice or strutted screens and enclosures, carved gablets (where a hip and gable roof intersects), exposed rafters, flat wall surfaces, clay tiled roofs, shuttered windows and clerestories, cusped arches at the sanctuary's entryway, tray ceiling within the sanctuary, and simple and limited detail applied at select areas of the synagogue compound. The synagogue is not simply made up of a sanctuary but a complex of spaces featuring distinct buildings containing a series of rooms linked or surrounded by outdoor spaces. Although all the space once served the religious, communal, and educational needs of the congregation, in more recent years some of them have lost their original function or are no longer used, and many remain unseen by the thousands of visitors who regularly line up to visit.

Typical to other Kerala synagogues, the gradual movement and hierarchy of spaces leading from everyday secular life inwards towards the religious and sacred domain, a dramatic and memorable processional experience notable to Kerala synagogues, can be experienced in the plan of the Paradesi Synagogue compound (Figure 153). The synagogue property is positioned perpendicular to the road on which it is accessed, Synagogue Lane in Jew Town in the Mattancherry area of Kochi. The narrow Synagogue Lane, paved and without any sidewalk or curbing, is a dead-end thoroughfare where most of the houses lining both sides of the road were owned Jewish owned and occupied, but today as previously mentioned only ten Jews reside in this district

After a slight bend in the narrow road, the east-west running Synagogue Lane abruptly dead ends at the synagogue property, yet from here there little to see of the actual Paradesi Synagogue compound ((Figure 157). Nearly all of it is hidden behind tall, mostly solid walls. The only hint of the synagogue standing on the lane is the clock tower directly ahead. The small three-story structure, nearly square in plan, with its gabled clay tiled roof capped by a cupola is most prominent and photographed feature of

the Paradesi compound (Figure 161). On first impression, based on its strategic position and height, many believe this to be the synagogue's prayer space, but the free-standing sanctuary is located to the west and not seen from the lane.

Paradesi Synagogue's three-story clock tower is not original to the compound but was erected nearly two centuries after the synagogue was initially built. Dating from 1761, it was built under the direction of Ezekial Rahabi, a leading figure of the Paradesi Jews at that time and the representative of the powerful Dutch East India Company. The Dutch colonial period of India, dating from 1665 to 1795, was a stable period that the historian Benjamin J. Israel describes as the Golden Age for the Paradesi community. They flourished not only as the Chief Merchants for the Dutch but also as their agents in negotiations with local rulers and as interpreters. During this high period, the synagogue compound was enlarged to include the clock tower, which is sometimes described by sources as fully Dutch although it is an Indo-colonial design and does not represent a distinct and pure Dutch architectural style.

There is a local legend of how the clock tower came to exist. During a visit by the Dutch governor to the Rajah of Cochin to his palace, the Rajah fell asleep. Using scissors, the irritated governor clipped the Rajah's whiskers. The Jews determined to avenge the insult of the beloved Rajah. On some pretext they entered the Dutch Fort in Fort Cochin, hid themselves overnight, and then took the clapper of the bell that was used to summon troops in the event of an emergency. The Dutch governor realized his gaffe and by way of amends he donated the clock tower to the Paradesi Synagogue. As per another version of the story, it was not the governor but the Rajah who gave land for the tower (Segal 1993, 48).

As with many other colonial period buildings throughout Kerala, the clock tower incorporates local design and construction elements, such as the thick laterite stone load bearing walls veneered in white-washed chunam, then fused with various colonial influences popularized by both the Portuguese and Dutch, such as the brackets, clay roof

tiles, cupola details. It is not so much a soaring tower but a squat and chunky square form (Figures 161 and 157). The wall plane of the tower's three levels is not co-planar, but it steps back slightly at each higher floor. The ground level wall is solid except for an off-center, narrow pair of painted wooden doors. The wall planes at the upper two levels are punctured by windows of different sizes and placements. At the second floor are two asymmetrically placed openings that have no relationship to the doors below. The one on the left is vertically orientated and features painted wooden balusters, and the one on the right is a horizontally orientated and filled in with a painted wooden lattice. At the top level, the elevation is seemingly symmetrical: the large clock face is flanked by a twin pair of deeply revealed shuttered openings made of painted wood. In response to the harsh monsoon season requiring regular upkeep of any local building, the walls of the clock tower are routinely repainted, and in recent years they have varied in color from shades of blue and purple at the upper level set against a rust base to the current scheme of white walls and slate blue windows.

The clock tower's façades along three sides feature clock faces at the uppermost level. The tower's massing is covered by a gabled clay tiled roof with deep overhangs supported by wooden brackets. The roof is then crowned by an open cupola in the form of a small widow's walk that is capped by another gabled roof also with deep overhangs. Here copper, an indigenous material used in other local buildings including some roofs of smaller Hindu temples, is the finished roofing material versus clay tile. A finial featuring two spherical copper balls, some filigree, and a metal mast and flag resembling a weather vane rests on the apex of the copper roof. The design of the cupola, square in plan, includes four rounded-arched openings set within a painted wooden structure with quoins at the four corners. A solid rail fills in the lower section of each of the arches. On the surface of cupola is an inscription in Hebrew indicating that it was constructed in the year 1761. There used to be a bell within the cupola which would be rung every day except on the Sabbath (when Jewish law forbids the ringing) which would call the Jews to



prayer. In 1986 the bell stopped working, and the community was unable or unwilling to have it repaired. It was removed a short time later, and today the tower remains silent and empty of its original auditory fittings. There was an attempt to bring the bells back when the clock tower was restored in the winter of 1998-99 through the World Monuments Fund, but the effort for financial and logistical reasons was unsuccessful.

The clock tower has three existing dials painted a light blue. To the north, facing the maharajah's place, the characters on the dial are Malayalam; to the south (Figure 156), viewed from Jew Town, they are Roman numerals; and to the west, from the synagogue side, Hebrew letters are used (Figure 154). According to I. S. Hallegua, a leading member of the Paradesi Jewish community, it is likely that there once was a fourth dial on the east side, facing the water, with numbers. Hallegua believes that the fourth face was likely removed in 1800 (Weil 2002, 55). The clock dials are made of local teak wood that for years has been painted. Below the faces are verses from the Hebrew Bible, including "our days are like a passing shadow (Psalm 144:4) and "we bring our year to an end like a tale" (Psalm 90:9) (Segal 1993, 48). The only existing pointer is on the Roman dial and is made of copper. The clock mechanism, operated via heavy stones, pulleys, and gears, worked until the early 1940s. Even though the Paradesi Jewish community at the time was still sizeable and funds were likely available for the project, there was never a serious effort to repair or replace the mechanism. From that point, the non-working clock faces began to deteriorate, and by the 1990s they were in poor condition. Like the bell, there was a plan to bring the clock back to working order when the clock tower was restored by the WMF in 1998/9, but the work was too costly.

The entrance to the synagogue compound is not through the pair of narrow doors at the clock tower's base but along the adjacent wall to the west that faces the street (Figure 162). This two story wall, also finished like the clock tower with chunam veneer over laterite stone yet currently painted a different color scheme of a waist-high rust base and very pale purple-blue walls, is solid at the ground level except for a second pair of

solid and painted wooden doors set in the thick wall. Flanking the doors are twin copper and glass scones, and above it is a scalloped glass fixture. To the left of the doors and below the scone is a chunam bowl that projects from the wall. This traditional feature, one seen at many historic Kerala buildings including some synagogues, was where oil for lighting purposes was burned during pre-electricity days. Today three large signs directed to tourists are posted on the wall to the left and right of the entry doors. The second floor of entry wall, which steps back slightly from the lower level, contained four matching openings with wooden shutters painted slate blue. They are reached via two semi-circular granite steps that project into Jew Street. To the east, accessed via large and heavy swinging iron gates, is a walled grassy outdoor area that was once used as a playground for Jewish children living in the district and attending school here (Figures 163 and 164).

The synagogue compound is clustered in layout, with spaces built or linked around a series of small indoor and outdoor rooms. In her article on the Paradesi Synagogue, Ilana Weil described the layout as being centralized with the spaces built around an axis mundi (Weil 2002, 53). While the spaces are connected, the compound does not have a pronounced significant central point with any axis originating from it, so describing it as such implies a formal organization that does not definitively exist (Figure 153). Entering the synagogue through a solid wooden door, the visitor goes through a procession of gradual movement from secular life to the sacred domain, finally reaching the sanctuary proper and lastly the *heckal*. Yet, compared to the synagogues at Kadavumbhagam-Ernakulam, Chendamangalam, Parur, or Mala when they were intact, the journey to the sanctuary is not straight and flowing but contorted, tight, and includes a series of turns. Either directly along the way or just off the main circulation path at the Paradesi Synagogue are places for ritual practice, community purposes, and Jewish education. The first space to be entered from the street is the *talam*, a rectangular gatehouse space measuring approximately 10' x 20'. Today this small room functions as

an office where tourists purchase their entry tickets to the synagogue, but its intended purpose is to serve as a transition zone from inside to outside and the place where synagogue meetings were once held and the stair leading up to the women's seating area and the educational spaces within the clock tower is located. The *tallam* and its openings are not on axis with the sanctuary of the synagogue or any other indoor, covered yet outdoor, or courtyard spaces.

From the *tallam*, the visitor makes a tight turn and passes through a narrow opening leading to a choice of spaces. Ahead, although not on a direct axis, is a short corridor that connects to a small room (6' x 12') that was originally intended as a storeroom. In the late 1960s, the members of the synagogue commissioned the Hindu artist S. S. Krishna from Kerala to paint ten canvases portraying the Paradesi community's historical events over the centuries for the celebration of their quatercentennial in 1968, and they have been exhibited in this windowless space ever since.

Returning to the point just off the *tallam*, a short covered yet unenclosed zone (about 10' x 7') leads directly ahead to the sanctuary building. The courtyard surrounding the sanctuary building can be accessed from either side of this breezeway. Since the sanctuary building is not precisely centered in the courtyard, this private space, contained by high walls, varies in size on all sides (Figure 165). The courtyard not only protects and separates the sanctuary from the outside, secular or non-Jewish world, but it served as a gathering area for routine ritual, holiday, and life-cycle activities. Most famous of these celebratory events is when members of the community circumambulate the courtyard on the Jewish festival of *Shimhat Torah*, or Rejoicing of the Law, during the afternoon service, singing, dancing, and clapping while carrying the Torah scrolls. The ground surface of the space is in part finished in granite stone pavers, a hard material not readily available to the region yet used in important secular and religious spaces, and the walls are chunam over soft laterite stone. Within the courtyard are a loose collection of scrubs, overhanging trees, and a well positioned near the northeast corner. Water from

the well served the communal needs of the Paradesi community for centuries, and similar ones can be found at other Kerala synagogues. In years past, a non-Jewish servant poured water over the stone pavers around the perimeter of the synagogue and on the exterior walls themselves to keep the building as cool as possible on the inside during the prayer services.

The sanctuary of the synagogue is a two-storied building with attic constructed of thick load-bearing laterite stone walls veneered with chunam (Figure 159) that are periodically pierced with windows and openings. The building is covered by a relatively steeply pitched gabled roof at the east side and a hipped roof at the west end that is finished with flat-profiled clay tiles set over a framing system fabricated from local wood (Figure 161). The sanctuary building is made up of three spaces: the *azara*, sanctuary, and women's gallery. The *azara*, an anteroom found in all Kerala synagogues, is entered directly off the breezeway linked to the earlier described spaces (Figure 165). It is rectangular, measures some 9'-5" x 27', and is finished in whitewashed chunam over laterite walls, a terracotta tiled floor, and a wooden beamed and planked ceiling. Flanking the entry door are a pair of true-divided lite wooden casement windows with painted, solid wooden shutters, and the two short ends of the *azara* (the north and south sides of the building) each feature single windows and shutters of the same design. In the center of the west elevation of the *azara* is the opening to the sanctuary. Its most prominent feature is its multi-foil cusped arch, a design often associated with Islamic, Moorish, and Mughal architecture (Figure 165). No other Kerala synagogue contains such an arch design, and in fact it does not exist in any synagogue elsewhere in India, although the form can be seen in medieval synagogues in Spain and Moorish-inspired historicist synagogues built much later throughout Europe and the United States in the late nineteenth century.

The *azara* in the Paradesi Synagogue has various functions. After the second stair leading to the women's gallery was installed, it became a connecting space where

the women would pass through and enter the sanctuary before ascending to the gallery level. It is also the room where the *Cohanim* performed important rituals. As the direct patrilineal descendants from the Biblical Aaron, the *Cohanim* since the period of the Court of the Tabernacle, have for centuries performed many duties as commanded by the Torah, and in the Paradesi Synagogue they ritually washed their hands in a brass basin before blessing the congregation. In a purely functional sense, it acts as a waiting or holding area where latecomers, along with mourners and women gathering at weddings other celebrations, would sit. The *azara* has always contained charity boxes for contribution to the synagogue and other needy causes, and it was also the place where its members and guests would sit on either its built-in seats set into north and south walls or on wooden benches along the adjacent west wall and remove their shoes before entering the sanctuary.

The Kerala Jews have always removed their footwear, a practice unfamiliar if not foreign to most Jews around the world. There are various theories about why this became custom, ranging from a borrowing of the custom from Hindu, Jain, and Muslim communities in India when entering their respective houses of prayer, the general tradition of taking off shoes for general hygienic considerations when arriving at an Indian domestic dwelling, to the remembrance of the divine command to Moses on Mount Horev to remove his shoes, for the place where he stood was holy ground. Even today, the *Cohanim* remove their shoes when going up near the ark/*heckal* to bless the congregation in most synagogues throughout the world. The *azara* also once served another less than noble purpose. According to Ruby Daniel, who was born and lived in Kerala before immigrating to Israel in the 1950s, the Paradesi community included a group of *meshuharim* (liberated slaves) Jews who until the 1940s were not allowed into the sanctuary or women's seating area on the gallery level. Said to be second class members of the Paradesi community, the men were delegated to the *azara* during prayers, and the women sat outside the sanctuary building altogether on benches lining the edges

of the short breezeway (Johnson 1995, 119). The *azara* functioned as a place where this discriminated segment of the community could get close and hear but not completely enter and become fully participating members of the full community in a fashion related to the outcasts relegated to the early Christian narthex.

The largest and most important space of the Paradesi Synagogue compound is the sanctuary (Figures 166 and 168). In the tradition of all Kerala Jewish houses of worship, it is rectangular in plan and double height. Measuring 27' wide, 42'-8" long, and 19' high, the sanctuary, the focus of all religious worship, is a centralized space where bench seating, never fixed in place or in the form of individual seats, surrounds the central *tebah*. The walls of the sanctuary are white-washed chunam and the shallow tray ceiling is detailed in a grid of square panels of painted wood each featuring a lotus pattern. During select Jewish holidays and life-cycle celebrations, the walls of the sanctuary are adorned with hung colorful fabrics furthering the design of the space and its sense of place. Unique to this synagogue among other Kerala synagogues is its tile floor made up of hundreds of 30 cm. x 30 cm. blue and white willow pattern Chinese tiles. The hand painted tiles, each slightly different, were imported by Ezechiel Rahabi in 1762 and are hence not original to the synagogue. Accounts vary as to why and how the tiles were purchased and installed. One reveals that they were brought by the Rajah for his use in his palace, but when he learned that they were fabricated using unholy cow parts, as a devout Hindu, he sold them at a good price to the Jews (Segal 1993, 49). The tiles are even known to Salman Rushdie, who refers to them in his 1995 novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* when he writes:

Legends had begun to stick to them. Some said that if you explored for long enough, you'd find your own story in one of the blue-and-white square, because the pictures on the tiles could change, were changing, generation by generation, to tell the story of the Cochin Jews. Still others were convinced that the tiles were prophecies, the keys to whose meanings had been lost with the passing years. (Weil 2002, 54)

Paradesi Synagogue's white and blue floor tiles were installed in a stacked bond pattern on the floor and risers and threads of the step throughout the sanctuary. The quality of the tile work was, however, not ideal since the tiles edges, set on a grid, weave back and forth across the length and width of the floor. Since the tiles are directional, meaning that they have a top and bottom, it is curious why they were used on a floor and not on the surfaces of a wall. Except when a visitor approaches from the east, which is the way the sanctuary is entered, the willow patterned tiles are viewed upside down or obliquely.

Paradesi Synagogue sanctuary's whitewashed chunam walls provide a neutral backdrop to the profession of added decoration, notably the plethora of hanging colorful glass and metal chandeliers and lanterns. It was only in the 1960s that electricity was provided to the Paradesi Synagogue, and even today none of these fixtures, some imported from Belgium and France and others locally fabricated, have ever been electrified. Two of the lamps were donated by the British Resident, Colonel Macaulay, and others were also gifts to the synagogue (Segal 1993, 49). Coconut oil, produced from the vast supply of trees to the local area, for centuries has been used as the primary fuel for these lanterns, including the *ter tamid*, or light that always burns, or the brass and glass fixture lit every Shabbat. Ilana Weil notes that the oil lanterns in different sizes and shapes hanging above one's head are in contrast to the Chinese tiles set beneath one's feet. While the tiles tell a story of everyday life, the ceiling has lamps which are symbolic of the divine presence (Weil 2002, 57).

The lyre, key hole, or pitcher-shaped *tebah* at the Paradesi Synagogue (Figure 168) is positioned roughly in the center of the synagogue for practical as well as religious purposes. Measuring 6' in diameter that engages to a square piece measuring 3'-9" wide x 2'-0" long, it can be seen from all angles and positions in the room and be protected and surrounded by its congregants during the reading of the Torah scrolls. The community is in fact embracing the activity. So too it is raised slightly by two risers from

the main floor plane, so that everyone can see the ritual proceedings, as well as for religious reasons, so that all present can feel the divine elevation and physically look up to the Torah as it is read. While it is not necessary for a *tebah* to be elevated since the sacred word of the Torah is relevant regardless of elevation and placement, it is a common feature to many synagogue throughout the world.

The *tebah* is contained by a stepped railing featuring twenty-five shaped polished brass balustrades that rest on the carpeted floor of the *tebah*. These profiled balustrade, measure approximately 39” inches in height, are capped by a polished brass banister. The banister is then topped by a two-tiered secondary series of slimmer and shorter polished brass balustrades. At the curved end of the *tebah*, or the side closed to the *heckal*, the railing is at its highest level before its “arms” symmetrically step down twice. These curved “arms” intersect with the straight lines at the entry to the *tebah*, which feature flanking polished brass scrolls. At the end of the *tebah* and wherever the railing steps up, short polished brass and profile balustrades with glass domes are positioned. These provide lighting to the *tebah* and further definition and a sense of importance to the space. Surrounding the outside perimeter of the *tebah* is a very low wooden bench that is normally draped in a colorful fabric. Here, since it is so low to the floor, young boys would often sit. The men have always sat on the long wooden, with gut backs set within the wood frame, that have for years lined the perimeter of the sanctuary or been positioned near the central *tebah* and near the entry doors to the room.

The Paradesi Synagogue’s second *tebah* is located at the center the gallery level in a shallow space overlooking the sanctuary that is supporting by two polished brass columns that flank the entry doors to the sanctuary (Figures 167 and 168). These columns are positioned 5’-11” on center from the east (entry) wall and 8’-11” on center from one another. While their function is to support the gallery, over the years these twin profiled pillars have come to represent or recall the pairs of freestanding columns, Boaz and Jachin, believed to have existed in Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. The special



*tebah* is reached via a steep wooden stair that is located in the northeast corner of the sanctuary, or to the right when entering the space. The L-shaped stair is used by the men who remove the *Sefer Torah* from the *heckal* and carry it upstairs to the second *tebah* during Shabbat and holiday services. At other times, the Torah is read from the ground floor *tebah*. The gallery measures 27' in length, or the size of the sanctuary, but only 6.5' in width. The second *tebah*, rectangular in plan, is defined by the wood balustrades of the railing that bump out towards the sanctuary. The reading platform, a flat painted wooden plane, is set 36" off the floor. On one of gallery's wall hangs a piece of *matzoh*. Each year, wheat flour is taken from each Jewish home and baked into a single piece of *matzoh* symbolizing the merging of all Jewish homes into one communal household. The *matzoh* ritually establishes an *eruv*, a community boundary which permits observant Jews to carry food or payer books from house to house, or from house to synagogue, on Shabbat and festivals (Weil 2002, 57).

Adjacent to the gallery and second *tebah* is the women's seating area. This room, measuring 27' in length and 9'-5" in width, is accessed via a pair of doors that swing into the women's area on axis with the second *tebah*. The gallery and women's seating area are adjacent to one another, but they are separated by a *mechitza*, or perforated screened partition made of wood. This partition allows for the sights and sounds of the service to filter into the women's area but provides a degree of visual privacy and separation common to other orthodox synagogues throughout the world. This room was for centuries the place where the women would sit, yet in more recent years they have sat at the back of the men's area since there are so few of them and many are elderly.

The *heckal* is normally the most sacred, and hence decorated or embellished feature of the synagogue throughout the world, and in the Paradesi Synagogue this tradition is maintained (Figure 166). As per Jewish practice, the *heckal* is placed within the sanctuary along the wall closest to Jerusalem, which at the Paradesi Synagogue is west. 8'-6" in width, it is a beautiful hand-carved object fabricated from local teak wood,

stained, and highlighted with gold, red, and some green paint is accessed by three steps covered in the Chinese tiles. The carvings on the surfaces of the *heckal* are mostly organic and floral in nature, popular motifs in many synagogues since no graven images or human or figural representations are generally permitted within Jewish houses of prayer. These natural forms are also popular in other secular and religious architecture in Kerala. Topping the *heckal* is large panel featuring a series of festoons and swags surrounding a *keter*, or crown. The crown, a popular motif on cabinets storing Torah scrolls in all regions of the world, represents the sacred and high place of the Torah in the Jewish religion and not the majestic system of a Jewish king. Below the light blue crown are inscribed the words *Keter Torah* (“The Crown of the Torah”). The *heckal* doors are covered by an elaborately embroidered *parokhet*, or curtain made from a woman’s *mundu* (sarong), hung from metal rings and a rod (see page 210).

According to an emissary from Jerusalem who visited the Paradesei Synagogue in 1850, the *heckal* was made from “a compound of clay...(mixed) with the fat milt of the nuts of the kukus, in other words coconut water instead of plain water, for the cement was mortar, so as to withstand many days and to honor the greatness that was among them” (Segal 1993, 50). The Torah scrolls stored within are each housed in a rounded wooden case which is cover with hammered silver. The Torahs are capped with crowns, some 22-carat gold, studded with rubies, sapphires, and emeralds (Figure 169). To Jews, the *Sefer* Torahs are the equal of royalty, and are thus decked out as such. One of these crowns was presented by the Hindu Maharajah of Travancore in 1805 (Segal 1993, 49). In front of the steps leading up to the *heckal* is a rug presented to the synagogue by Emperor Haile Sallassie of Ethiopia in 1956 (Weil 2002, 55). Flanking the *heckal* are two sconces with glass shades and two inscription slabs set into the chunam walls. Two special chairs, one for the Prophet Elijah and the other for the *brit mila*, or circumcision ceremony, are positioned near the *heckal* when needed. Both are made from beautifully carved, stain wood with a plush cushion and perhaps a richly colorful fabric draping it.

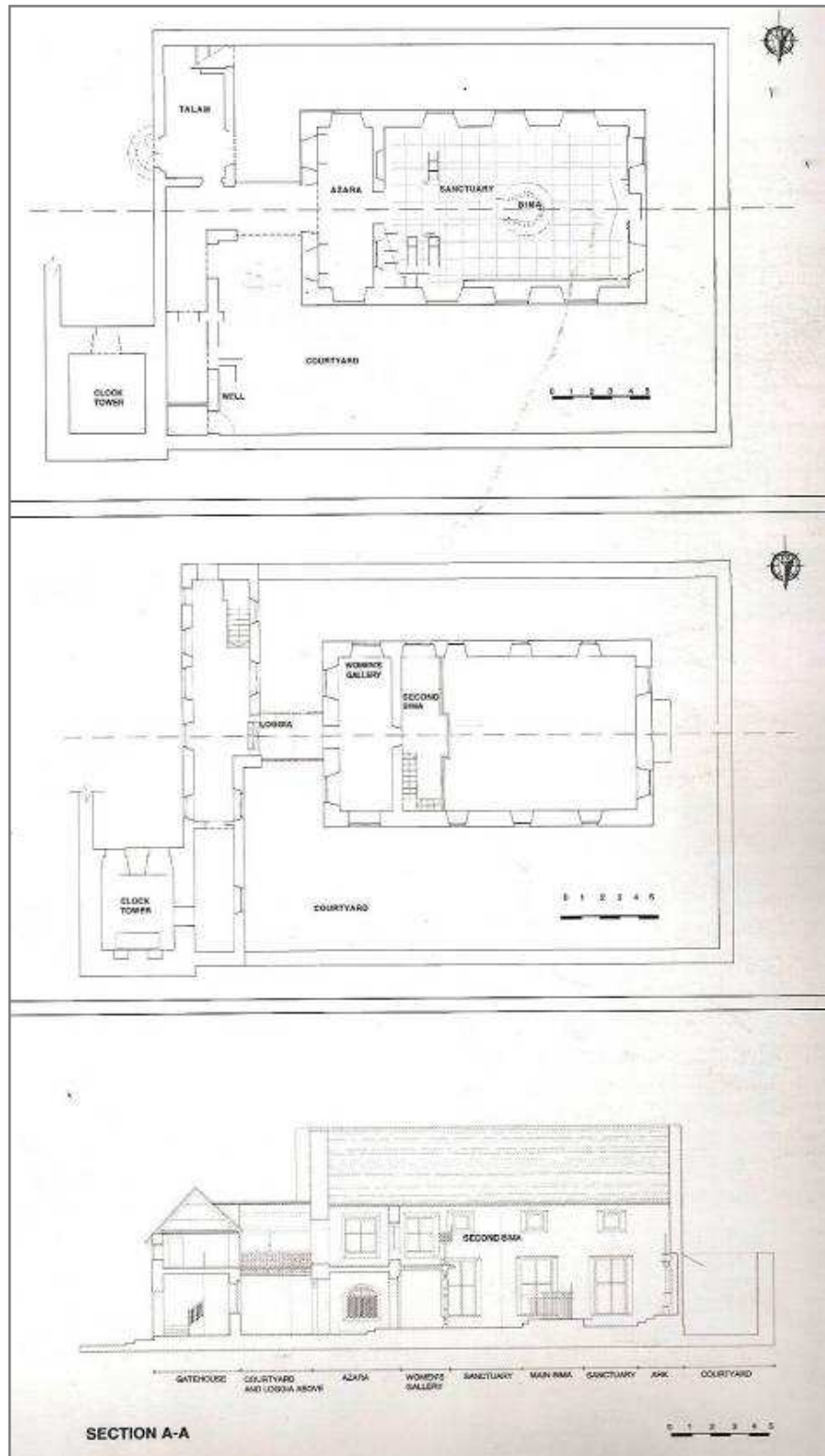
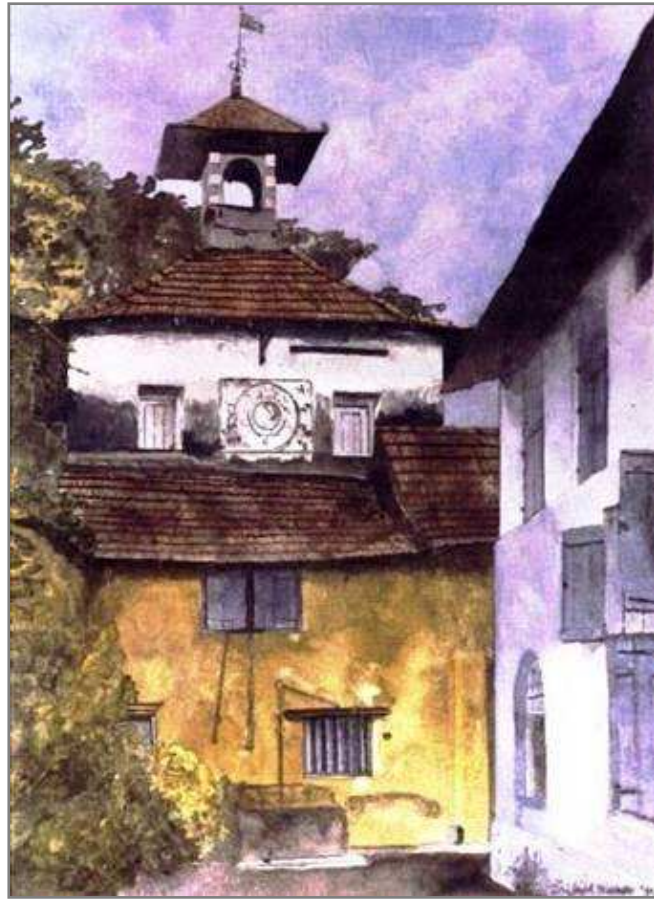
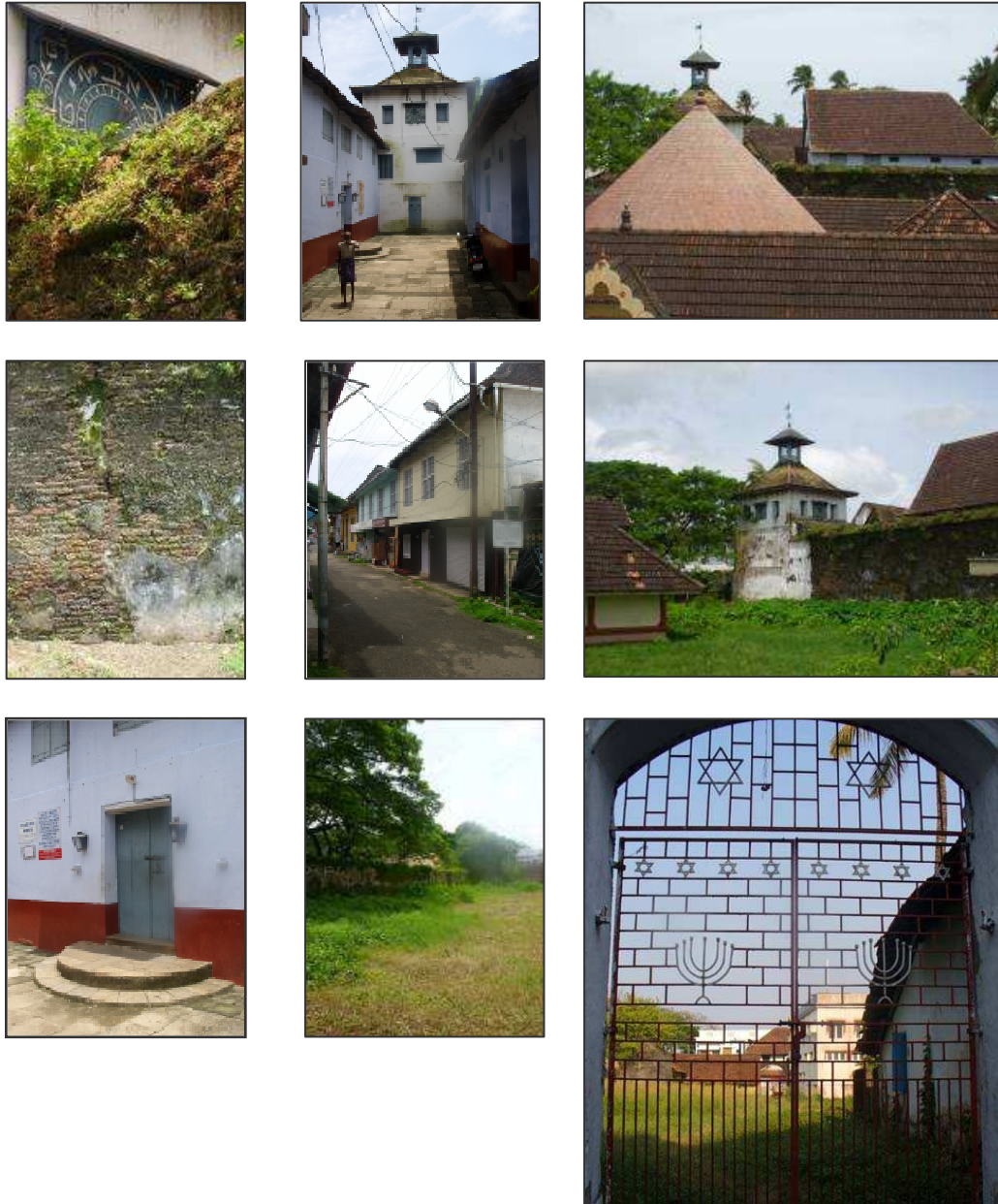


Figure 153/PARADESI SYNAGOGUE  
FLOORS PLANS AND SECTION  
(PERMISSION OF ILANA WEIL)

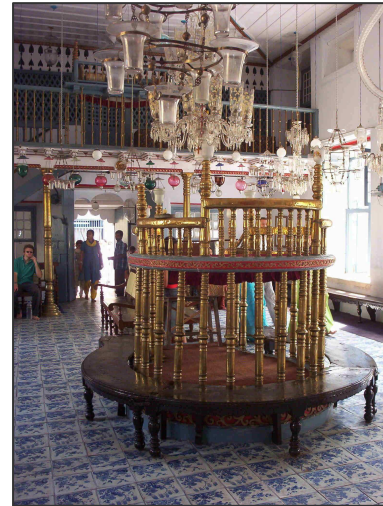


Figures 154 and 155/PARADESI SYNAGOGUE  
(JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)





Figures 156 – 164/PARADESI SYNAGOGUE – JEW TOWN, SYNAGOGUE CLOCKTOWER, NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT, JEWISH PLAYGROUND, AND SYNAGOGUE EXTERIOR WALL, ENTRY TO SYNAGOGUE FROM STREET (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



Figures 165 – 169/PARADESI SYNAGOGUE – ENTRANCE TO  
AZARA, SANCTUARY, AND HECKAL  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)

Written accounts of the Jews of Kerala can be found in a variety of Western diaries and histories, and one example from the mid-sixteenth century mentions a synagogue that perhaps was the Paradesi. During his visit to Kochi, a Portuguese Jesuit named Diogo do Soveral writes in a letter to Lisbon:

The Jews celebrated their festival, because it was the Sabbath. I entered, although this was not pleasing to them, and I think that heard that we were entering. I quickly took off my shoes but I did not want them to see this. I went inside. All the house was full of lamps and there was an Ark beside which the Rabbis were sitting and praying. There was a sort of box in it in which were the books of Moses, written in Hebrew, which they placed with great reverence. And they opened them there and began to expound in Hebrew. There came great and small, all of them in fine clothes of purple and silk. Those who entered first washed and all the house was covered with mats. Some of them were called Rabbi Abraham and Samuel. (Segal 1993, 31)

In 1996, the World Monuments Fund's (WMF) Jewish Heritage Program included the Paradesi Synagogue in a list of Preservation Priorities formally adopted by the organization. A preliminary report was prepared in 1997, and a more detailed one was completed the following year that included measured drawings of the entire complex and descriptions of the site's architecture, construction, materials, and conservation needs. From this information, detailed preservation plans and budgets were prepared for all design and implementation aspects of the work.

The World Monument Fund's concerns were for the integrity of the buildings, but also for the need to better accomodate the growing numbers of Indian and international tourists drawn to the Paradesi Synagogue, and to include relevant historical and cultural programming to make visits more meaningful. For this, the World Monument Fund (WMF) received the full support and cooperation from the Paradesi Jewish community. In addition, long-term administrative and financial arrangements for the building needed be implemented to ensure future access and maintenance. The WMF prepared a complementary report, "Revitalization of Jew Town, Cochin, India," which laid out a

synagogue preservation program into a larger scheme for the revitalization of the historic Jew Town. Based on these studies, the WMF initiated conservation work on the Pardesi Synagogue clock tower. Further elements of the plan, which were only partially funded, included a variety of small repairs, material replacements, and alterations to existing buildings (often removing recent unattractive and destructive accretions). The plan, never realized, also called for the refurbishment of the synagogue courtyard to create a memorial court, adaptation of the synagogue entrance building to better accommodate crowds, rearrangement of the unused custodian's to serve as a exhibition space, the design of a landscaped garden in place of an empty adjacent lot to the synagogue; the establishment of a Cochin Jewish Heritage Center in a community-owned building now used as a residence, the opening of a restaurant at the edge of the garden in a building that the community leased, and other improvements and changes.

The Pardesi Synagogue clock tower was restored with funds provided by the WMF during the winter of 1998-99. WMF and its partners in Kochi searched for a clock mechanism similar to that removed from the tower in 1941, yet the clock restoration as well as the chimes was ultimately not successful. Repair work on select areas of the synagogue (exterior and interior walls in particular) was also completed, although new and adaptive spaces as described in the strategic plan above were never carried out.



### **CHAPTER 13    KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY**

For centuries, Kochi's Mattancherry was a vibrant center for Jewish life with its three synagogues lining Synagogue Lane in Jew Town alongside Jewish schools, homes, and places of businesses. Hundreds of Jews lived, worked, prayed, were educated, played, socialized, and celebrated life-cycle and holiday events here, representing one of India's and the world's true centers of Jewish existence. Although this small area of Kochi has never been exclusively Jewish as Muslims mixed with Hindus and Christians have lived here as well, it was indeed a Jewish enclave by choice where its people existed side by side and interacted on a regular basis. Yet these Jews were never a homogenous community, but rather made up of individuals of distinct cultural and social backgrounds who arrived in Kerala at different periods and from disparate places. They may have all shared a religion and certain common interests, but they never spoke from a single voice or existed as one communal people. This can be confirmed by fact that they in time built three distinct synagogues all located within a short walk.

With the Paradesi Synagogue belonging to Kerala's Paradesi Jews, two others house of prayers once co-existed in the heart of Jew Town in the Mattancherry: the now demolished Tekkumbagam Synagogue almost immediately to the south on the west side of the street, and the Kadavumbagam Synagogue a bit farther south on same side of Synagogue Lane about a seven minute walk from Paradesi Synagogue. These latter buildings served the Malabari Jews of Kerala for centuries, and both closed in 1955 when their respective congregations immigrated en masse to Israel. Since that time, Jew Town has become predominantly Muslim, and not long ago the local government was petitioned by its current residents to formally change the street's name from Jew to

Muslim Street. In respect to the remaining Jewish community living in the area and its centuries-old history, the request was firmly denied.

A portion of the former Kadavumbagam Synagogue still stands today and can easily be seen from the road, but it has been severely compromised over time and the building, sold to non-Jews some decades ago, is padlocked and difficult to gain access to (Figure 170). For years the thousands of tourists visiting the Paradesi Synagogue just down the street have been unaware of this neighboring former Jewish house of prayer, and they leave the area bypassing the site. Even those who may have known about it, the synagogue is always locked. Any attempt to ascertain and then contact the current owner is time consuming and difficult. To correct this oversight, in January 2010, with the permission of the Paradesi Synagogue community, I posted a framed announcement in their gatehouse including information on the Kadavumbagam Synagogue and directions for finding it.

Over the years, the former synagogue and the property that it stands on has changed hands, and the structure has served a variety of non-synagogue purposes. When a stretch of Jew Street running in front the building was altered some time in the 1960s, the two story gatehouse of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue and the connecting breezeway to the rear were demolished. Today the only portion of the former synagogue compound still standing is the sanctuary building. In recent decades, this remaining portion has been abused and poorly maintained, and the small open space that once surrounded it on the sides and rear has been encroached upon by more recent walls, although the tight courtyard remains mostly intact (Figure 171). At the time the road was shifted and straightened, other buildings in the immediate area were likewise affected, so it is no longer possible to experience the synagogue in original context.

From the landmark Paradesi Synagogue, the Kadavumbagam Synagogue is located directly on Jew Street, also known to as Synagogue Lane, just south of the intersecting lane that leads east to the water front and jetty where the passenger ferry

docks. The rear of the synagogue faces Kallarakka Parambu Road, a paved narrow thoroughfare lined with residences (Figure 173). Today the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, much altered, but still identifiable, a gabled building with its flaked walls and steel roll-up door, can easily be overlooked beside more intact neighboring historical architecture, including a few former Jewish residences with their prominent *Magen Davids* (Stars of David) on the exteriors. Seeing at it today offers little suggestion of its former glory, yet the Kadavumbagam Synagogue was once an attractive building. It gets its name from its location; in Malayalam, *kadavu* means landing place and *bagam* means side.

The early history of the Kadavumbagam building is unclear. A local source refers to a synagogue built here as early as 1200, ruined, and then rebuilt by the *Mudaliyar* (community leader) Baruch Levi in 1539 (Joshua 1988, 1). A local narrative indicates that the Kadavumbagam Synagogue was established in 1130, and its name was taken from a synagogue that existed in Cranganore. Oral stories indicate that the synagogue was built in 1400 when Jews abandoned the nearby Kochangadi Synagogue just south of Jew Town (yet this did not happen historically until 1795), that it was ruined, and then rebuilt around 1530, or that three local Jews were responsible for its construction from 1539 to 1544. A. I. Simon claims that the last dates are the correct ones, and he wrote that Baruch Levi, father of the first *Mudaliyar* Joseph David Ha Levy was responsible for beginning its construction. In 1549, the synagogue was completed by Yaakov ben David Castiel, the brother of Elihu Shmuel Castiel, the third *Mudaliyar* and father of David Yaakov Castiel, the fourth *Mudaliyar* (Segal 1993, 33). Another source offers a slightly different history in that in 1539-40 the building of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue was begun, and it was completed by Barukh Joseph Levi who had restored the Cochangadi Synagogue. The Kadavumbagam Synagogue was extended or restored in 1549 by Jacob David Castiel (Segal 1993, 31). Since the building was only a few years old when Castiel initiated his work, it does not seem logical that the synagogue would have needed restoration or an extension by that point.

On the second floor of the synagogue was once an inscription, which may have belonged to the earlier synagogue at Kochangadi (Sassoon 1932, 577). At some point after the synagogue was left behind by the departing Jewish community in 1955, the inscription slab was lost from the building. Orpha Slapak writes that a stone inscription for the Kadavumbagam Synagogue verified its date of construction as 1544, although no details, descriptions, or details of it were mentioned (Slapak 1995, 57). This inscription that Slapak refers to is no longer on site, and its whereabouts today is unknown to me.

Enough of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue remains standing today to recognize it as a quintessential example of vernacular Kerala architecture for its materials, construction technique, and massing. In response to the climate and annual monsoons and drawing from locally available materials and regional construction techniques, the building features a steeply sloped clay tiled roof with deep, open eaves that are set on wooden rafters. The roof framing system is supported by load bearing walls made of hand-cut laterite stone blocks that are veneered with chunam. Although many of them have now been altered or removed, thick synagogue walls were punctured by large wooden windows and doors with transoms and shutters providing natural light and ventilation to the inside (Figures 170 – 173).

Although the road and adjacent buildings in the immediate area of the former synagogue have changed since the Jewish congregation left Mattancherry in the mid-1950s, there was once an open space directly across from the synagogue compound which extended east to the nearby water and provided a view of the landing place for boats traveling southward (Figure 177). In years past, according to a narrative recalled by Ruby Daniel, who was born in Kochi in 1912, the Rajah of Cochin would set sail in private boat from his Dutch Palace (built by the Portuguese to honor the rajah and his royal house and upgraded during the Dutch period) at the northern end of Jew Town just beyond the Paradesi Synagogue. Whenever his Highness was about to travel southward and pass the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, news of his voyage would reach the

congregation. Someone from the community would open the doors of the gatehouse (today missing), those of the azara in front of the sanctuary, and finally the *heckal* which, in Kerala synagogue tradition, were all on a longitudinal axis. The Rajah's boat would pause at the landing, offering him a clear vista from the water, across to the shore, through the gap between neighboring buildings towards the synagogue and all the way through the spaces of the building to the end point: the *Sefer Torahs*. According to this tradition, the Rajah of Cochin would then stand and prostrate himself towards the synagogue. This was the practice as long as the Rajah's residence was in Cochin. Even after the rajah changed his royal residence to a palace in Ernakulam, the landing place opposite the Kadavumbagam Synagogue in Kochi was kept in tact (Johnson 1995, 129).

In two old books containing songs chanted in Malayalam by women of the Paradesi community, Ruby Daniel discovered one about the building of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue. In her rough translation, since the song is difficult to understand, it goes as follows:

An important land in the world is Cochin.  
The honorable Jews of Kadavungam are there.  
All the Kadavumbagam people joined together  
All raised up carefully a synagogue.  
Important people gathered and said the blessings,  
The elders and the young people together.

Saying the blessings the foundation was laid.  
Gold and pearls were put in the middle,  
And they raised the synagogue over the pearls.  
The place where god's Eminence is seated  
Is the western side.  
The heckal was established like pure silver.  
There were two doors.

The pillars were bent and made into an arch with two rooms.  
The Torah that was created before two thousand years,  
The Light of the Lord of the World,  
It is there for a fact.  
It has brightness like the sun and the moon,

Under the tiled roof.

Beautifully ten and five sections were divided into fifteen.<sup>61</sup>  
At a height of give and a quarter koles, they stood pillars.<sup>62</sup>  
On this the platform was made at a length of five koles.  
A staircase was put there to climb up,  
And a place for the ladies (the ones who cover their heads)  
To sit and pray to God.  
To see and hear the prayers being conducted, there were three doors.

They made very red crests and engravings,  
Beautiful lotus flowers too.  
In the middle a beautiful tebah was made, with legs of wood.  
By the grace of God, bring near the good years.  
Please bring the nation who are Your children  
To the noblest land of the world.

In all the world, one of the best ports is Cochin.  
The famous Jews have come there also.  
God, who reigns in sound and light,  
We are Your slaves, praying to You  
To save us also.  
David and Eliyahu will come.  
Then the shofar will blow  
Eight hundred people will pray.  
Help us, God, forever. (Johnson 1995, 130-131)

Although the Kadavumbagam Synagogue is today the most compromised and hence least pleasing of Kerala's surviving synagogue buildings, old photographs indicate that it was once an attractive building (Figures 175 and 177). In the tradition of other Kerala synagogues, its thick load-bearing walls were constructed of locally quarried laterite. This soft rust-colored stone, cut in manageable sizes of standard bricks or small ashlar blocks, was laid in simple coursings with mortar, veneered with chunam, and then whitewashed. Along the longitudinal ends of the sanctuary, canted buttresses made of laterite and chunam were added, five on each side (Figure 172). Since the laterite and chunam walls were structurally strong, the buttresses applied to them, which seem to be original to the current building, seem superfluous. Yet according to Kerala tradition, the buttresses represented valued strength and stability. Following local building practices, a

steeply pitched timber framed roof covered with clay tiles either locally produced or later factory made Mangalori ones rested on the load bearing walls. In local fashion as a response to the hot and wet climate, the roof eaves were open and deep to provide shade, air flow, and protection from the blowing rain. Similar to other Kerala synagogues, the roof ends at the east and west sides of the sanctuary building are not the same. In order for the front (east) façade to accept the two story gabled breezeway (now missing), the roof was gabled. To the rear (west side) of the sanctuary, since there was no engaged piece, the roof is hipped (Figures 171 and 173).

When in tact and in its prime, the Kadavumbagam Synagogue was notable for its exterior ornamentation and painted surfaces, specifically at the gabled end of the sanctuary building (Figure 177). The interior of building was also unique to other Kerala synagogues for its particularly elaborately carved and painted woodwork (Figures 174 and 175). Though the majority of Kerala synagogues featured ceilings and balconies made of wood with detail drawing from the region's secular and religious building traditions using timber, the ones at Kadavumbagam were the most sophisticated and intricate. Some decades after the building was left behind by the departing congregation, the synagogue's interior finishes were carefully removed, they were shipped to Israel. The two-storied sanctuary, with attic space above, sat in a walled and unusually tight courtyard that was once partially paved in granite. The use of the hard stone, a rare and expensive material in Kerala, was special for the reasons discussed earlier in my thesis in the chapter on Keralan architectural traditions.

The main entrance to the synagogue complex was originally through a gatehouse, a broad and shallow space facing the road. This entry structure remained even after its congregation departed for Israel, as seen at Figure 177 dating from 1957, but at some point it was demolished. Like the sanctuary building, it too was two-storied featuring a steeply gabled roof (its gable running perpendicular to that of the sanctuary), but it was a considerably lower massing. From the street, the ground level elevation of the gatehouse

had a center opening with rounded off corners, and the doors appeared to be a pair of solid wood that swung inward. It is possible that the design of these doors included smaller pairs of doors within larger doors, a common element in Kerala architecture, but the photograph is not quite clear. To enter the gatehouse from the porch, one had to take a big step up and over a high threshold. On both sides of the doors were bowl-shaped oil vessels engaged in the wall. The first floor whitewashed walls of the entry structure were otherwise solid except.

In front of the gatehouse entry doors was a small open portico that served as a transition and protection zone. It was made up of a clay tiled roof and a typical Kerala crenellated wooden fascia board set on a pair of slender round granite columns flanking steps leading up to the entry doors. These columns and their bases rested on the second of two risers of the front porch. These steps were bordered by *hasti-hastas*, or low end walls with curved elephant-like trunk shaped tops similar to others seen in Kerala, including at many Hindu temple complexes. Since the gatehouse of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue no longer stands, and photographic or visual documentation is limited, a full description of its interior spaces is not possible. The lower level of the entry building/gatehouse likely included a *talem*, or foyer that could be used for community and meeting spaces, and a stair, and its upper floor had a handful of rooms used as a Jewish school. Similar spaces can still be found at the nearby Paradesi Synagogue. The 1957 photograph indicates small triangular wall vents placed to the north of the entry porch that roughly aligned with the floor line of the second level. The spaces of the school had three symmetrically arranged, short windows with painted wooden shutters swinging outward. The center window aligned with the entry porch below and a false dormer above. This gabled roof feature that rested on the tiled roof contained a decorated central panel flanked with short end pilasters. Set atop the pair of pilasters and at the center ridge were finials, a Portuguese colonial architectural influence. The 1957 photograph (Figure 177) seems to indicate that the flat surface of the false dormer was



decorated with a painted ornament, although it is badly worn and difficult to discern. Supporting the deep eaves of the gatehouse roof were small and narrow metal brackets symmetrically arranged along the façade.

On axis with the portico and entry doors and connecting to the rear of the gatehouse was a breezeway. While nothing remains of it today and there is no apparent physical indication on site that it even existed, period photographs offer some evidence that the piece existed. While they do not show the actual breezeway, the profile of the structure is revealed in pictures along the front (east) façade of the sanctuary building in the form of construction or wear marks. Whenever a building that once butted up to another is demolished, it typically leaves a pronounced impression or stain. Some type of doors to the back (west) side of the gatehouse led to the breezeway which, in the tradition of other Kerala synagogues, was likely open yet covered on the ground level and fully enclosed upstairs. Since there is no physical or pictorial documentation of the space, this is mere conjecture based on the pattern of other Kerala synagogues. From the street, the men could pass in linear and ceremonial fashion through the porch, gatehouse, and breezeway into the sanctuary building with its *azara* and prayer room. In less direct fashion, the women would ascend up the stair in the gatehouse and make turns before passing through the breezeway's upper floor (perhaps designed in Kerala fashion with the bowed venetian-like lattice and strut enclosure system seen in other area synagogues) that led to the women's seating area. Similar to the one at the Paradesi Synagogue and in contrast to the particularly long one at Parur, Kadavumbagam's breezeway with its steeply pitched gabled roof was likely short since the site is not generous.

While the gatehouse and breezeway no longer stand, the main building of the synagogue containing the *azara*, sanctuary, gallery, and women's seating area remains, although not fully intact and in derelict form. Its façade seen from Jew Street has been considerably altered: where the breezeway once engaged in the building, a canopy and two wings walls all out of painted concrete were added, two original wooden windows

were removed and filled in, and a wide and high steel roll up door replaced the pair of wooden doors once leading from the breezeway into the *azara* at the ground floor. Five concrete steps were constructed in front of the sanctuary to provide a way up to the modern roll-up door, and the small parcel of land now separating the building from the curb bordering the paved street is overgrown.

At the sanctuary building's second floor, the wall has been compromised: although the pair of solid wooden doors centered on the elevation that once provided a way into the women's gallery to from the breezeway remains, they now "float" and lead to nowhere (Figure 170). The wooden windows that formerly flanked these doors were removed and the hole sealed, and the entire wall was resurfaced in chunam to conceal any hint of the former design. A photograph taken in 1970s after the removal of the gatehouse reveals some of the now missing or covered over-remnants, but none of this is evident today (Figure 171). The attic level of the façade has also been extensively altered. The original gabled area stepped back from the plane of the first and second floors by a few inches, creating a shelf. This bump remains, although the chunam and laterite once found here were removed and filled in solid with brick. All the applied decoration that once covered the gable end and made the Kadavumbagam Synagogue unique has long been removed and lost: the painted wall surface pattern along the rake, a pair of shallow engaged pilasters, an attic window, and the ornamental panel filling the triangular area at the apex of the roof and just above the window. It featured a border of tightly space crenellations below the rake line and a crown positioned at the apex of the triangle. Dangling from the base of the crown was a twisted and looped rope. Below that was a band of trim in a half octagon shape surrounding a short Hebrew inscription illegible in the photograph (Figure 177). A carved wood filigree fascia board also once graced the sanctuary's gabled end as a rake cornice.

The north, south, and west exterior walls of the sanctuary building are mostly in tact, although the chunam finish is now badly soiled, weather stained, and chipped away

in many places. In these areas, the laterite is now exposed. While the rectangular wood framed attic vents divided into two sashes are still in tact – two along the west elevation and three each along the north and south sides – most of the ground floor openings have been altered. In some instances the original solid wooden shutters that swung outward remain in place, although the openings on the inside of the building have been filled with laterite and chunam. In the sanctuary, for example, this is the case with seven of the eight openings on the first level, and only the center one on the north wall not been disturbed. At the one opening each at the ends of the second floor balcony, the two holes have not only been filled in but the actual shutters have been removed. In the *azara*, the two front (east) windows as well as the one on the north wall were removed and their holes filled solid, although the south window was removed, the opening made narrower and the header dropped, and the cutout was converted to a pair of solid wood doors that swing outward. Two stone and concrete risers wedged between two buttresses were added to the outside of the building to step up into the *azara*. Aside from these wall buttresses and the windows, the only other decorative flourish to the exterior walls of the sanctuary building is a broad band of chunam over stone between the first floor and tall attic levels that wraps around the three sides of the structure between the balcony windows. Due to the lack of maintenance on the Kadavumbagam Synagogue for several years, some of the clay roof tile at the eave line have broken or fallen.

Compared to the other Kerala synagogues set in an open space surrounded by a wall, the Kadavumbagam's courtyard is particularly small. Today some of the original walls have been altered, and in cases newer ones were laid in front of older walls, so the size and composition of the outdoor area has changed. In fairly recent years, after the synagogue was sold, an outdoor toilet and privacy wall was added at the far western portion of the property, furthering altering the tight space. In its current configuration, there is 19'-6" of space to the south, 16'-0" between the building and the perimeter wall, and 19'-0" of overgrown courtyard along the north side.

In 1818, while one of the exterior walls of the synagogue was being repaired, a stone slab was discovered from the Kochangadi Synagogue, which once existed nearby. According to this inscription, the construction of that synagogue was started and had to be halted since the congregation were not able to complete and decorate it. Only later, with the help of the Paradesi Jews Baruch Levy in the sixteenth century, was the Kochangadi Synagogue fully completed (Sassoon 1932, 568). The Kochangadi Synagogue inscription can today be found inset in the east wall of the Paradesi Synagogue's courtyard.

Although the original entry sequence into the *azara* has been changed, the space itself remains, albeit stripped of its finishes and in squalid condition (Figure 180). The Kadavumbagam Synagogue *azara* measures 9'-10" wide x 22'-0" long x 10'-0" high. Although off to some degree, the space is close to the 2:1:1 proportions of the anteroom at Solomon's Temple. The *azara*'s floor is concrete, the walls (34" thick) are finished with a chunam veneer, and its ceiling is wood with dropped beams. As mentioned earlier, all the original windows and doors have been altered or removed altogether and the opening fill in.

In the 61" thick chunam over laterite partition wall separating the *azara* from the sanctuary are two "windows" flanking a centered opening now without doors. Affixed to the narrow section of wall separating both sides of the doorway from the windows used to be two long and narrow marble slabs. Dating from 1938, inscribed on the slabs are the names of those who contributed to Kadvaumbagam Synagogue's renovation in 1937 and 1938 (Figure 182). The list is long and impressive: along with the names of local Jews is the Rajah of Cochin and Jewish donors from Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Karachi, Rangoon, Singapore, and London alongside the amount each contributed. The two light gray stone slabs, measuring 18.5" x 48", surviving the stripping of the building's interior in the mid-1980s when its contents were shipped off the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and they were removed from the wall by the non-Jewish owner, K. J. Regina, who purchased

the former synagogue in 1999. Above the doorway and between where these two donor inscriptions slabs were once placed is another inscription that survives, albeit worn. Written in Hebrew, it reads “this is the gate that the righteous will pass” (shown in part in Figure 177). At the doorway is a single concrete riser as the floor of the prayer space is one step up.

Today the sanctuary has been stripped of all finishes, fittings, and details, yet the raw space remains (Figures 178, 179, and 184). It measures 21’-8” wide x 35’-5” long and because the finished ceiling was also removed, the attic with its windows, rafters, tie beams, and underside of the clay roof tiles has been exposed. The floor of the sanctuary is concrete and the 34” thick walls are finished in chunam. The demarcation of the original finished ceiling is discernable: below it the chunam is more finished and in better albeit dirty condition while above the chunam is thinner and in large areas it has chipped away and the laterite exposed. A tie beam was retrofitted in the sanctuary at some point to stabilize the structure and prevent the longitudinal walls from splaying. Except for the center window on the south wall, the others have all been removed and the hole filled in with laterite and chunam. The balcony that once existed in the sanctuary was removed as well, and today a makeshift wooden ladder provides the only way up to the former women’s seating area directly about the *azara*. This upstairs area is now cluttered with odd lumber and building material debris (Figure 181).

According to Ruby Daniel, a Jew born in Kochi in 1912 who lived just near the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, in the early 1920s the area around the *heckal* had to undergo some repairs, and during the work Hebrew and Malayalam writings on scrolls, copper plates, and even stones were discovered. After they had been read, some were buried near the same spot and then paved over while others were brought to the Paradesi Synagogue (Johnson 1995, 130). The content of these writings and their locations are today unknown.

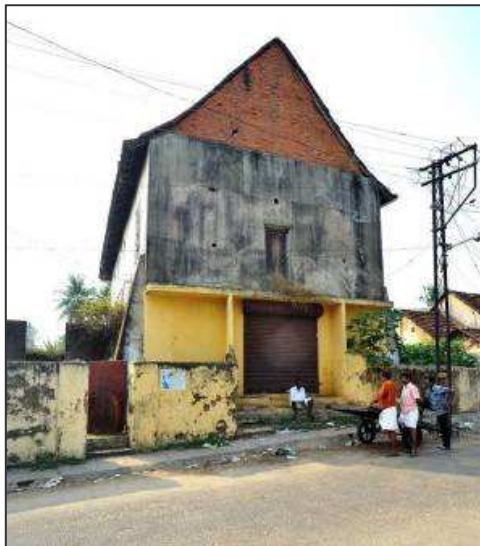
At the time of the Kadavumbagam community's emigration en masse to Israel in 1955, the synagogue was officially handed over to the Bombay Jewish Agency under the care of Paradesi Jew, S. S. Koder. Just before they left Kochi, the *heckal* was removed from the sanctuary and it too traveled to Israel, but the Kadavumbagam Jews (many who came to settle in *Moshav* Nevatim southeast of Beersheva in southern Israel) failed to claim it from the customs service and, in the end, it was allocated to *Moshav* Nehalim, a German Jewish orthodox agricultural community founded in 1952 at a site just southeast of Petah Tikva in central Israel where it has remained in their synagogue ever since (Figure 183). After sitting for some years, the building was rented out in 1965 to Vanajan Traders as a storage facility for coir. Around this same time, the synagogue's gatehouse and breezeway were demolished to allow for Jew Street to be straightened. In 1981, Vanajan Traders purchased the building outright for 35,000 rupees from S. S. Koder, who had secured power of attorney in order to sell it. Ten years later, the former synagogue was sold to V. G. Anthony (Regina 2010). During his ownership, Anthony arranged for the sale of the interior of the synagogue, including the balcony, finished ceiling, doors, all trim and casework, fittings, and any remaining furnishings, to English Jews by the names of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Worms, who eventually had the items shipped to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem where they were extensively restored and painstakingly reassembled in the form of a period room. Since that time, the Kadavumbagam interior along with the *heckal* and *tebah* of the Parur synagogue have been on exhibition. In very recent years, during a large expansion and renovation of the Israel Museum, the period room was closed, yet it was scheduled to reopen in late July 2010.

In 1999, V. G. Anthony, for financial reasons, sold the former synagogue to its current owner, K. J. Regina, a local Hindu woman who had once worked for Vanajan Traders. Since that time, Ms. Regina has held onto the building, refusing to lease it to, in the hope that it would be purchased by a buyer sympathetic to its former function as an important religious building. The asking price in January 2010 of 60 lakhs, or some

\$125,000, was steep however, and during a meeting with Ms. Regina at that time I advised her that a potential patron might be located who could turn the building into a Jewish cultural center, but the price was much too high.

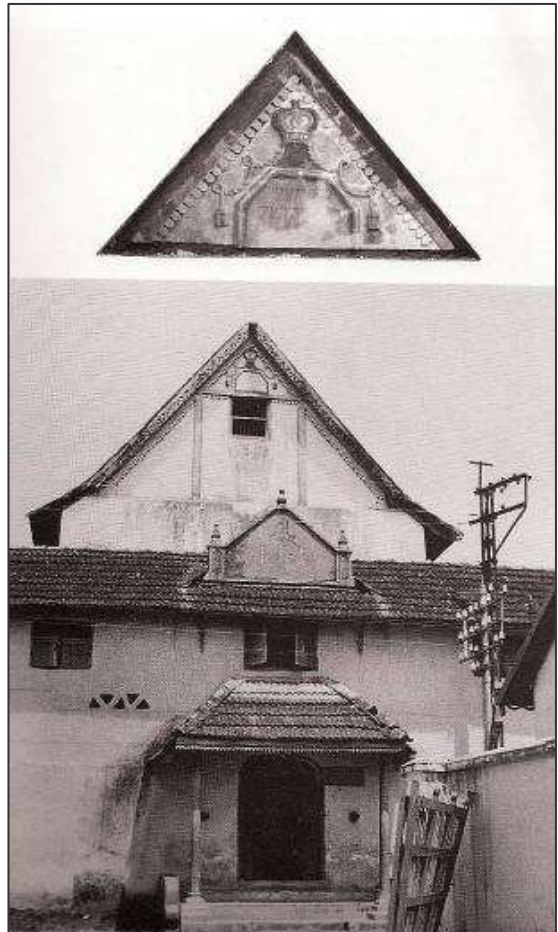
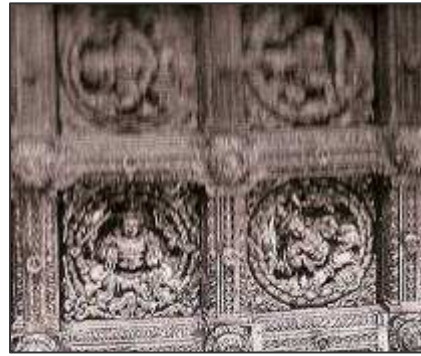
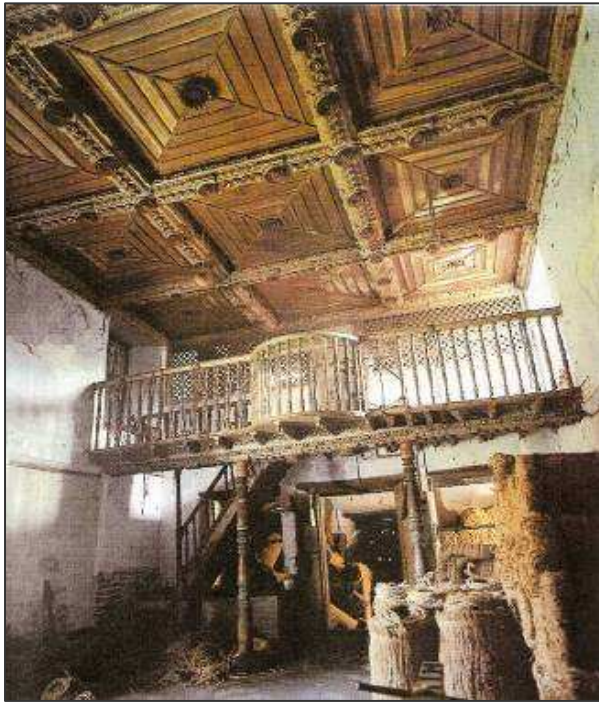
Before the interior of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue sanctuary was stripped away, it was a beautiful space (Figures 174 and 175). The ceiling was particularly notable for its square wooden panels five wide by seven long divided by an intricately carved grid of an egg and dart pattern, circular medallions, and lotus flowers. Each wooden panel featured a design of narrow battens arranged as six squares that got progressively smaller towards the center of the panel. Battens then crisscrossed each square panel, which was accentuated by a carved lotus flower in the center. Ceilings of similar kind may be seen throughout Kerala in mosques, churches, palaces, and other important buildings. This type of ceiling is particularly common to Hindu temples in Kerala, where they may be even more highly carved with organic reliefs and statues of gods. At the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, the ceiling was inspired by this rich local tradition, yet the carvings were simplified, partly perhaps for economics yet essentially since synagogues follow a tradition of rejecting depictions of human figures and images of gods.

Similar to the beams separating the panels of the ceiling, the wooden header supporting the balcony was also intricately carved in an organic design that included lotus flowers along its underside. Fourteen carved and shaped brackets running perpendicular to this header and extending out to the face of the balcony added another design flourish. The two wooden columns supporting the balcony, the ones found in all Keralan synagogues, were thin, lathe-turned, featured square capitals and bases, and painted a muted polychromatic color scheme. The balcony guardrail was made up of forty-three slender gilded wooden, lathe-turned balusters capped by a gilded wood handrail. In the center of the guardrail was the bowed out second *tebah*. Leading up from the sanctuary level to the balcony, in the pattern of all Kerala synagogues, was a steep L-shaped wooden stair located in the northeast corner. Its balusters and cap were



Figures 170 – 173/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY  
 (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER EXCEPT TOP RIGHT  
 BY BARBARA JOHNSON)





Figures 174 – 175/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY  
 OLD INTERIOR VIEWS (TOP AND MIDDLE LEFT)  
 (BY JORG DRECHSE, 1990 AND BARBARA JOHNSON, MID-1970S)

Figure 176/KERALA HINDU TEMPLE CEILING AS COMPARISON  
 (TOP RIGHT)

Figure 177/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE EXTERIOR VIEW, 1957 (BOTTOM)  
 (ISRAEL MUSEUM COLLECTION)



Figures 178 – 181/KADAVUMBAGAM-MATTANCHERRY SYNAGOGUE, 2010  
(V. ISSAC SAM, PHOTOGRAPHER)





Figures 182 – 183/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, MATTANCHERRY - HECKAL  
(NOW LOCATED A *MOSHAV* NEHALIM, ISRAEL  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY A. WARONKER)  
AND INSCRIPTIONS IN AZARA (NOW IN THE POSSESSION OF BUILDING  
OWNER MS. REGINA (PHOTOGRAPH BY BARBARA JOHNSON, MID-1970S)



Figure 184/FORMER SANCTUARY OF KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE (2010)  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY V. ISSAC SAM)

similar to the ones at the balcony guardrail. The stair was stabilized at this bend by a lathe-turned post that connected to the underside of the balcony.

Following the tradition of synagogues in Kerala, the women's seating area was placed behind the balcony. The space was separated from the balcony and its second *tebah* by a *mechitza*, or partition. Compared to the other design features of the sanctuary, its design is understated and simple. It is made up of two panels, one to either side of the centered openings between the two spaces, of raw wooden strips set in a crisscross pattern. The two sections are set into place by a wood frame. Based on the photograph of the interior of Kadavumbagam Synagogue, it is not clear if there were doors in the *mechitza* or that there was simply a cased opening (Figure 174).

Once again according to Ruby Daniel, who grew up in a house just near Kadavumbagam Synagogue, there was once an incident with the synagogue when a thief broke into the building during the middle of the night. When he tried to approach the *heckal*, he heard the cracking of a whip. This frightened the man so much that he lost control of himself, soiled the place, and fainted. He was apprehended the next morning.

The Kadavumbagam Synagogue is also notable for many miracles attributed to it while it was in use. Daniel described a pious legend in which anyone, even unscrupulous characters or people of others religions, became sick, sought protection, safety, or misplaced something and sought to recover it, or when a woman was soon to give birth or just thereafter, it was customary to bring a gift or donation to the synagogue as well as to pray for good will. When there was a severe earthquake years ago near Quetta Afghanistan, a Bene Israel boy from Maharasthra State perished. His father sent a donation to the Kadavumbagam Synagogue so that every year on his son's death anniversary the boy's name could be called out and remembered. These associations with this synagogue, according to Daniel, were widely known to the entire Kerala community and far beyond (Johnson 1995, 129).

## **CHAPTER 14    TEKKUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM**

Kerala's Malabari Jews have lived in Ernakulam on the mainland of Kochi for centuries. While today there are only a handful of them still residing in this district of the city as a result of the community's mass immigration to Israel beginning in the mid-1950s, they were once an integral part of Ernakulam. Over the years, the Malabar Jews, a productive and hard-working group, pursued a number of professions and trades. Along with fishing and petty trading, many were merchants who ran small private businesses along the narrow and congested streets in the market area. These shop owners, who devised their own secret pricing code that incorporated Hebrew, and the other Jews of the community for years maintained two synagogues and a religious school. Today these houses of prayer, the Kadavumbagam and Tekkumbagam, due to the diminished Malabari Jewish community, are no longer functioning, yet they still stand as testament to the area's once vibrant Jewish presence. The synagogues were built in the heart of the market district within a few minutes' walk of one another.

A Malabari Jewish narrative goes that the Tekkumbagam Synagogue was constructed as early as 1200 after some of the community, seen as competitors in the lucrative spice industry, were forced out of Cranganore by the powerful Moors. They settled in Ernakulam since the Rajah of Cochin could offer them relative friendship and protection. A sign posted a few decades ago by the Association of Kerala Jews above the entrance to the synagogue property makes claim to this early thirteenth century date. Over the years, the story continues, the synagogue was periodically rebuilt. Another narrative, however, contends that in the 1520s the Jews were persecuted by the Moors a second time and more Jews shifted to Ernakulam. Local stories also go that during the time of the brutal Portuguese conquest of Kerala in the mid-sixteenth century, the Jews living in and around Cranganore were persecuted and some perhaps even hung. The

Rajah of Cochin, a tolerant and sympathetic man, intervened as best he could to defend the Malabari Jewish community. At this time they sought safe haven in Ernakulam. In appreciation, the legend carries on, the Jews asked the Rajah what they could do in return for him, and he replied that he wanted a bell. So some of the Jews, the in-shape and healthy ones, broke into the Portuguese headquarters at night and stole its large bell. It was brought to the rajah's palace in Mattancherry and quietly left outside on its grounds. The next morning, the rajah woke up to find the bell, and thus the Jews became known as the "bell thieves." As a token of his appreciation, the rajah gave the Jews land for building in the center of Ernakulam. Soon thereafter, a synagogue was built (Josephai 2009).

The Tekkumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam is also believed to have first been built in 1580 (Sassoon 1932, 1055). Whether it was this late sixteenth century building or a later one that was rebuilt on the same site, a deteriorated building was demolished in the 1930s to make room for the extant structure. Despite dating to a period when Modern architectural styles and influences had permeated throughout the world, the Tekkumbagam Synagogue was constructed in a traditional way faithful to the local vernacular genre. Standing on the north side of Jew Street between Market Road and Broadway and near to the west of a landmark mosque, according to local narrative the Tekkumbagam Synagogue gets its name from an earlier house of prayer built in Cranganore. That synagogue was believed to have been located on the southern edge of town – *tek* meaning belonging to the south side in Malayalam.

Tekkumbagam Synagogue's history from the late sixteenth into the modern era may be patchy and hazy, but certain things about it are known. A narrative reveals that the synagogue was modeled after the one in Parur, a building was damaged and rebuilt many times, leaving the specific precedent unclear. One old Malabari Jewish folksong sung by the women of the community in Malayalam focuses on the architecture of Tekkumbagam Synagogue. Although the date of its composition is not known, the

architectural details described in the song are of the synagogue that was the immediate predecessor of the current building. This is according to Isaac Joshua, who was born in Kochi and, now nearing 90, still resides in Ernakulam part time. An elder statesman of the Malabari Jews and long-standing president of the Association of Kerala Jews, Joshua as a boy grew up in the Tekkumbagam Synagogue and recalls some things about the previous building (Joshua 2009).

The folksong about the old Tekkumbagam Synagogue (referred to in Malayalam as a Jew *palli*, since a *palli* is a religious building) goes as follows:

The God who existed from the beginning, the One to whom all should bow down,  
How difficult for anyone, however righteous, to stand before Him!  
Oh Lord, awaken our hearts to worship You  
In this palli, the joy of our life.

Crossing the decorate threshold of polished granite stones,  
Walking across the place spread with fine caral sand,  
Then we pass through the handsome entrance way.  
Washing our feet at the break of day,  
We walk around the four side of the palli.  
Oh Lord, awaken our hearts to worship You  
In this palli, the joy of our life.

Like a graceful stone set in a ring,  
A small place in front of the palli  
Is built as if with pearls.  
And inside the palli, an upper floor is built,  
Where heaven's beauty has descended.  
Oh Lord, awaken our hearts to worship You  
In this palli, the joy of our life.

As if rising out of the purest of pure gold,  
As if itself built from the purest of gold,  
The Jewish palli is made pure in its golden essence.  
Of golden black, its shining floor is made.  
This palli floor is so excellent  
That it rings out like the chiming of bells.  
Tekkumbagam is an external treasure box.  
Oh Lord, awaken our hearts to worship You  
In this palli, the joy of our life. (Johnson 2004, 44-45)

The black floors that existed in the old Tekkumbagam Synagogue were a distinctive feature of traditional Kerala architecture. These floors, used only in special applications such as in rooms of the Rajah of Cochin's Dutch Palace in Mattancherry, looked like polished black marble but were actually a mixture of burned coconut shells, charcoal, lime, sugar cane or other plant juices, and egg whites. To maintain their luster and aid in their longevity, they required frequent buffing and sealing.

Along with recalling the synagogue's black floors, Isaac Joshua remembers as a child playing in the soft sand that carpeted the outdoor space surrounding the building and framed by property walls. The folksong makes mention of a decorated threshold of polished granite stone. The hard stone is a significant material in Kerala architecture since it has always been comparatively rare to the immediate region and difficult to quarry. It was thus relegated to key parts of important buildings such as palaces and temples. The granite would be used in basement levels to make use of its compressive strength and durability, and on walking and touching surfaces to maintain the highest level of cleanliness. Since purity is a key element of the Hindu religion, the hardness of the granite made these contact areas more resistant to contamination. That granite was used at the threshold of Tekkumbagam Synagogue is also noteworthy since it marked a physical boundary between the contaminated and profane world on the outside with its dirt roads and the more clean and sacred one within. Although the granite did not continue into the courtyard space of the synagogue, another special material was used. A fine, pure, and prized *charol* sand taken from the local river bed, was instead spread over the courtyard space, thus creating a distinct sense of place (Joshua 2009).

In the mid-1930s, the Kadavumbagam Jewish community determined that the synagogue at that time, said to be in unstable condition and damaged, needed to be completely rebuilt, and a larger building was needed. Since it is not Jewish practice to demolish a synagogue outright, Isaac Joshua claims that the old synagogue was left intact while the new one was built around it or extended from the earlier structure, but this



method seems cumbersome and impractical (Joshua 2009). There is no indication within the current synagogue of any older pieces. The new sanctuary building as planned was to be the largest of all Kerala synagogues. Work on the project began in 1936 or a bit later, yet it was halted in 1939 when word about Hitler's invasions in Europe reached Kochi. There was even concern that Kochi would be bombed during World War II, and some Jews left Ernakulam temporarily for outlying small communities where fellow Malabari Jews resided. Construction was never resumed in the period that followed and, due to social and political changes as a result of Indian Independence in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel the next year, Malabari Jews began to leave Kerala. With its population much in decline, the remaining community determined that there was no need to complete the final phases of the project, which lacked the finished trim work, certain intended liturgical fittings and furnishings, and an exterior stair intended up to the women's gallery. Enough of the work had been completed, however, that it could be used by the diminished congregation. Since the 1940s, the synagogue has changed little except for newer gates along the streets and some alterations to the roof and stairs of the small entry porch (Joshua 2009) (Figure 188).

The yellow Tekkumbagam Synagogue (Figure 187), owned by the Association of Kerala Jews, is located on Jews Street in the middle of the bustling Ernakulam market. Today it stands mostly unused behind a pair of locked gates, and access to the building needs to be prearranged through the Association of Kerala Jews. In recent decades, earlier more decorative iron gates were changed out by the current painted aluminum ones. As mentioned earlier, a now badly faded sign was added above these gates to identify the synagogue and provide contact information for a viewing. In the summer of 2009, with the permission of the Association of Kerala Jews, I had a "Friends of Kerala Synagogues" heritage plaque hung on the wall adjacent to the gates to provide a short history of the building. The synagogue is difficult to spot from the street since it is

blocked by a row of mostly twentieth century low to mid-rise buildings broken only by a gap filled by the gates.

A narrow and straight paved alley beginning from this point (a place where motorcycles are routinely parked) and sandwiched between the walls of adjacent properties leads awkwardly to the southeast corner of the freestanding synagogue. The building is set within an overgrown courtyard covered in grass, high weeds, trees, and sandy soil. Today there is no evidence of the granite threshold or *charol* sand. The current synagogue and its surrounding property sit in a void between the rear of buildings lining Jew Street and the backs of the buildings that face the adjacent road to the north. On the other side of the courtyard, and aligning with the alley path from Jew Street, is a second opening marked by another pair of aluminum gates. A path leads from here as well, now bordered by a hodgepodge of small or medium-scale commercial buildings linked by a maze of allies. The walkway eventually spills onto main road, the thoroughfare running parallel and to the north of Jew Street. When the synagogue was functioning, its members, who lived and worked in the neighborhood, had the choice of entering from either side.

It is also possible, based on Joshua Isaac's recollection or the pattern of other Kerala synagogues, that the pre-1939 Tekkumbagam Synagogue had a gatehouse and connecting breezeway that were part of a larger compound which included more land to the east. Although today there is a wall to that end of the Tekkumbagam Synagogue's courtyard and just beyond is non-synagogue-owned land and buildings, the congregational property likely extended much farther originally, and it may have been approached, through some type of north-south connecting path linked to the main east-west roads, in a more traditional way via a gatehouse and connecting breezeway. While the exact architectural and planning details of any earlier building configuration – gatehouse, breezeway, and sanctuary – will unlikely be confirmed, this synagogue model

had been in place in Kerala for so long that it seems probable that the old Tekkumbagam Synagogue had followed it.

As with other Kerala synagogues, the current Tekkumbagam one was constructed out of rough cut and mortared laterite bricks and blocks that were veneered in chunam. For years the chunam walls have not been whitewashed but painted a yellow gold. These load bearing walls are similar to other Kerala synagogues with the exception that the Tekkumbagam building has a low rusticated granite base (Figure 187). This hard stone basement is significant for the reasons already covered. The structure is two levels high with a tall attic space, so from the exterior it looks very much like a three story building. In typical Kerala synagogue fashion, a series of windows and doors line the four sides to provide natural light and ventilation into the spaces. At the ground level, the window units are tall with wood-framed glass transoms above a pair of painted wood (blue gray color) windows with solid raised panels or small lites. Depending on their locations, each of these windows features two clear or colored glass panes at the top and six solid raised panels below. On the second floor at the women's seating and balcony areas, the window units are wider and are made up of a pairing of french doors with wood framed and glass transoms above. They are painted the blue gray color. Since the prayer room is a double height space, smaller rectangular wooden clerestory windows with glass line the upper walls. Painted the same blue gray, there are two along the west wall and three each at the north and south sides.

At the attic level are small openings that are today covered by a pair of solid wood shutters with two raised panels each and painted in the blue gray. The pair of entry doors to the *azara* is solid with raised panels. They, along with the wooden framed and colored glass transom above, are likewise painted blue gray. Although every window and door throughout the synagogue is rectangular, the masonry headers in the building's walls are shaped in a shallow arch, and the spandrel is filled with laterite covered in chunam. Above the larger windows, sloped awnings supported by thin metal frames and covered

with corrugated metal sheets were installed not long after the building was built as protection against the elements (Figure 187). Similar devices can be seen throughout Kerala, including other synagogues.

At the four corners of the building and spaced along the longitudinal (north and sides) elevations are engaged pilasters. Although pilasters are a common design feature in architecture, they had become particularly popular in Kerala during the Portuguese colonial period. These architectural elements rest on the granite base, which marginally bumps out to serve as their formal bases, and continue all the way up to the roofline. Since the three levels of the building are accentuated by a broad horizontal band of chunam over laterite trim that is whitewashed, where the band meets the pilasters it too bumps forward to serve as a pilaster capital or base.

Tekkumbagam's Synagogue's roof is of a hipped gable design with deep and open eaves in the tradition of Kerala architecture as a response to the monsoons or intense sunshine. The synagogue's wood framing system is a king post system yet modified to include a second series of supporting rafters below (Figure 185). The framing is covered with mangalori clay roof tiles and, in Kerala building tradition, their undersides can be seen hung to the wooden laths in the attic space. At the gablet ends of the roof and along the length of eaves are delicately carved wooden screens and details which, in vernacular Kerala fashion, add visual interest and beauty to this building. The roof's most exuberant architectural feature is the dainty wooden fleches, or pointed spires, projecting from the ends of the gablet ridge (Figures 187 and 188).

Tekkumbagam Synagogue's courtyard, in the tradition of Kerala synagogues, contains a fresh water well, and the grounds are today cluttered with weeds, dead branches, and overgrown trees, including coconut and mango varieties (Figure 193). The outside space has for years been marginally maintained at best, and as a consequence navigating around the synagogue has been difficult if not dangerous. It is not altogether

uncommon for poisonous snakes to be found in similarly overrun spaces in Kerala, so caution needs to be taken.

Following the model of other Kerala synagogues, entry to Tekkumbagam has always been on the building's short (east) side (Figure 186). The intended portico and exterior stair leading to the women's seating area were never realized, so a provisional porch was built. An old photograph (Figure 188) reveals that the current porch has been marginally changed since work stopped on the synagogue in 1939. In its current configuration, the porch is narrow and made up of two concrete 24" x 24" posts and a concrete header that support an exterior terrace. This small second floor outdoor space can be accessed from the women's seating area by a pair of narrow solid wood raised paneled doors with a wood-framed glass transom above. All of its wood surfaces are once again painted blue gray. At the corners of the terrace are two pipe columns that support a metal lintel holding up a small metal frame covered by the canopy of corrugated metal. Along the edges of the terrace is a guardrail of thin vertical metal balusters and a metal handrail. According to the photograph from the early 1970s (Figure 188), the terrace's waist-high railing was originally solid and faced in clay tiles. Sitting on top of this railing was a low chunam enclosure wall that supported this square columns and a very shallow pitched roof.

Two concrete steps within the entry porch lead to the synagogue's entry doors. Once inside, the arrangement of spaces follows the formula of Kerala synagogue architecture: an *azara*, or anteroom, and a double-height sanctuary on the ground floor and, at the second level and directly above the *azara*, the women's gallery and adjacent balcony, which overlooks the sanctuary (Figures 186 and 189). Since the synagogue was conceived at a time when the congregation was at its largest a few years before World War II, its spaces are the longest of all Kerala synagogues. By the time construction was underway, however, the domestic as well as international situation had considerably changed. Once the overwhelming majority of the congregation chose to make *aliya*, or to

immigrate to Israel, beginning in the mid-1950s, Tekkumbagam Synagogue became obsolete.

Tekkumbagam's *azara* measures 32'-5" long x 18'-3", or nearly in the same 2:1 proportion of the anteroom at Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The *azara*'s wall are chunam and white-washed at the upper section and painted in a wainscot manner a mint green color, and the two colors are separated by a thin dark green stripe (Figure 189). The room's ceiling is made of dark stained wood planks with dropped wooden beams running perpendicular (north to south) to them, and the floor is laid with quarry pavers set in a decorative pattern: a field of rust-red square tiles diagonally laid that is interrupted in the center of the room with a 5' wide east-west runner of larger beige tiles set orthogonally and bordered by narrow strip of gray tiles and, inset a few inches, a second tiled border in a bright blue color. This runner or paved "carpet" begins at the entry doors and draws the visitor into the *azara* and towards the sanctuary.

In Kerala synagogue fashion, windows line the walls of the *azara*. The roughly 5'-0" wide x 7'-6" high units with sills 17" off the floor are tall with stained wood-framed colored glass transoms above a pair of stained wooden windows detailed with raised panels or small lites. Each of these windows features two clear or colored glass (green, orange, or purple) panes at the top and twelve solid raised panels below. Over the years, some of the damaged colored lites that were replaced with clear ones. There are four windows in the *azara*: one each at the north and south elevations and a pair flanking the entry doors on the east wall. In the northeast corner of the room is a stairway leading up to the women's seating area on the second floor. The placement of this 4'-0" wide wooden stair with lathe-turned balusters and handrail is atypical to Kerala synagogues, yet it was put here when the building was never completed and the stair planned on the outside of the building went unrealized.

The most architecturally prominent element of the *azara* is the screen wall separating the room from the sanctuary (Figures 189 and 191). While other Kerala

synagogues were designed with a solid partition wall with window openings, in Tekkumbagam's case it is a screen wall in the tradition of the *mechitza* (the traditional Jewish solid-void wall element separating off the women's seating area). Here the partition was fabricated with three stacked rows of rhythmic, closely spaced thin vertical, round brass bars set in stained wooden frames atop a low chunam knee. The design gives it an open, *jali*-like feel that responds well to its function. For liturgical as well as practical purposes, the *azara* is intended to be a distinct anteroom providing a buffer from the profane outside world to the sacred interior and serve a variety of functional and ritual needs, but spatially it can be seen as connected to and visually associated with the overall synagogue experience, including the religious service. The way the *azara* and sanctuary relate to one another works well here. In the *azara* today is a collection of odd furniture, some of which has always belonged to the Tekkumbagam congregation, other pieces brought from outside Kerala synagogues when the buildings were sold or decommissioned, and the balance new. This includes wooden tables used for religious ceremonies such as weddings and the *brit mila* service, benches for seating, book cabinets with some denoted books for the community, a heavy wooden chest for synagogue offerings, and stackable plastic chairs used for recent communal gatherings.

The pair of doors in-between the *azara* and sanctuary, which follows the design of the screen wall that surrounds it, swings into the sanctuary. At the doors is a high saddle, a typical Kerala building detail that in this application slows down the progression from one space to the next. Passing from the outside secular world into the religious depths of the synagogue compound is intended to be slow and methodical, and this construction detail, albeit small and unintentional from a liturgical point of view, enforces the methodical and serious journey.

The double-height sanctuary at Tekkumbagam Synagogue measures 51'-5" long x 32'-5" wide (Figure 190). Since some of the intended finishes were never carried out, the room is simpler than other Kerala synagogue sanctuaries: the floor is raw concrete (coir

rugs and runners used to cover them are still in the space), the walls are whitewashed or painted chunam in the same pattern and colors as the *azara*, the ceiling is not paneled, shaped, painted, or carved but plainly finished with flat stained wooden planks running in the long (east-west) direction of the space with perpendicular (north-south) dropped beams, and the *tebah* and *heckal* are in place but not in the typical Kerala synagogue style. At Tekkumbagam Synagogue, the *tebah* is today centrally located and freestanding, it is raised off the floor by two painted (mint green with a dark green edging) wraparound masonry risers that are positioned in standard Kerala fashion to the east end, and in plan it is in the lyre-shaped form. Yet here the smooth painted chunam veneered base is missing the traditional Kerala synagogue tiered balusters and railing atop it. The original *tebah* with its polished brass pieces was removed from the sanctuary when the congregation immigrated to Israel in the mid-1950s, and today it is used in the synagoague at *Moshav* Nevatim near Beersheva in southern Israel (Figure 195). As a replacement, to the west side of the *tebah* base a simple curved wooden *tebah* with a railing around its top and draped with a *mappah*, or fabric was added. The edge of the *tebah* is positioned 22'-8" off the west wall and is centered between the north and south walls.

The Tekkumbagam Synagogue *heckal*, 13'-2" wide, is elevated off the floor by three steps in response to the Jewish tradition of looking up to the sacred *Sefer* Torah, and it is centrally located and engaged to the wall closest to Jerusalem. The carved and painted orginal *heckal* was removed when the congregation relocted to Israel, and today the doors can be found in the synaggoue of *Moshav* Nevatim (Figure 196). The remaining parts of the *heckal* were not used. The Tekkumbagam Synaggoue today therefore lacks the splendor of the intricately carved and gilded and painted teak *heckalots* of other Kerala synagogues. It is a squat 4'-6" wide plain wooden cabinet projecting from the wall 17.5" with a *parokhet* draped from a brass rod.



In Kerala synagogue fashion, the sanctuary contains large openings along its thick walls. Inset in these openings are 5'-0" wide x 7'-6" high window units (set 17" off the finished floor) featuring wood-framed glass transoms in-filled with vertical brass bars above a pair of stained wood windows with solid raised paneled or small lites. Each of these windows has two clear glass panes at the top and twelve solid raised panels below. In most Kerala synagogues there are ten windows said to recall the number of Ten Commandments, including the two at the partition (east) wall, but at Tekkumbagam with its metal and wood screened partition wall, there are only eight – three each along the north and south walls and a pair flanking the *heckal* at the west. Above each of these eight openings is a clerestory that can be interpreted to recall the ones found in the double height sanctuary of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Throughout the inside of the synagogue, the wall openings for the all doors and windows are arched. While the window and door units themselves have straight (flat) headers, the spandrel panels are filled with whitewashed chunam (Figure 194).

Today simple wooden benches without backs line the north, south, and west walls of the sanctuary. Similar benches yet lower and shaped around the curvilinear *tebah* base surround this central element. Two wooden benches with backs line the screen partition (east) wall, and they flank the entry doors (Figure 191). The pattern of lining the sanctuary walls with seating is not only practical, but it dates back to the ancient synagogues. Hanging from the sanctuary's ceiling directly in front of the *heckal* is the *ner tamid* (a light that always burns), a convention to all synagogues. Another fixture centered in the space is a traditional Kerala Jewish brass lamp made up of two tiers of connected flat rings holding thirteen round glass canisters for coconut oil. Both lighting elements, known as *chattakam vilakku*, dangle from a brass chain. Smaller fixtures holding just seven oil cups were also used at Shabbat, while the larger one found in Tekkumbagam Synagogue was lit mainly on holidays and special occasions. Similar chandeliers could be seen in churches; both Jews and Christians may have been

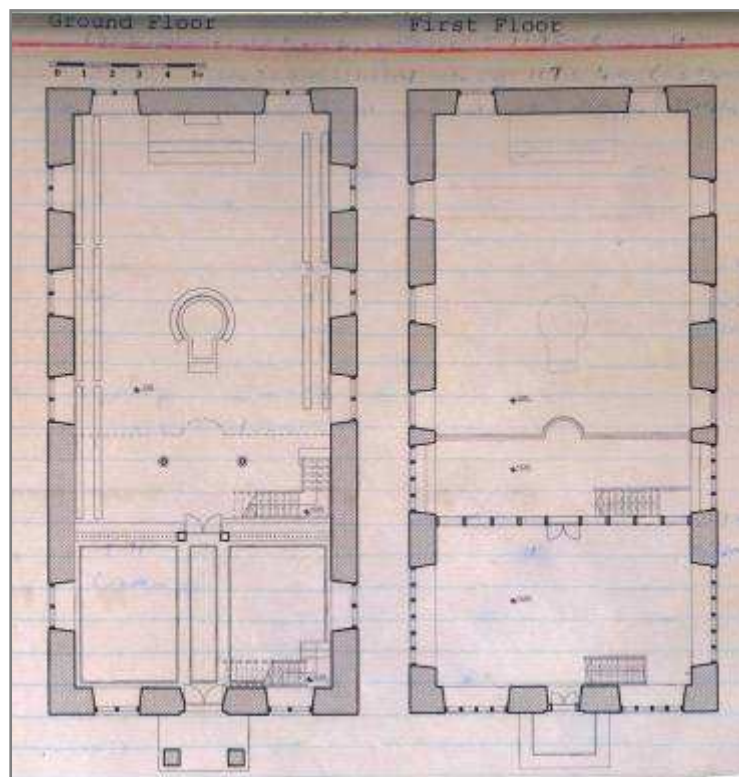
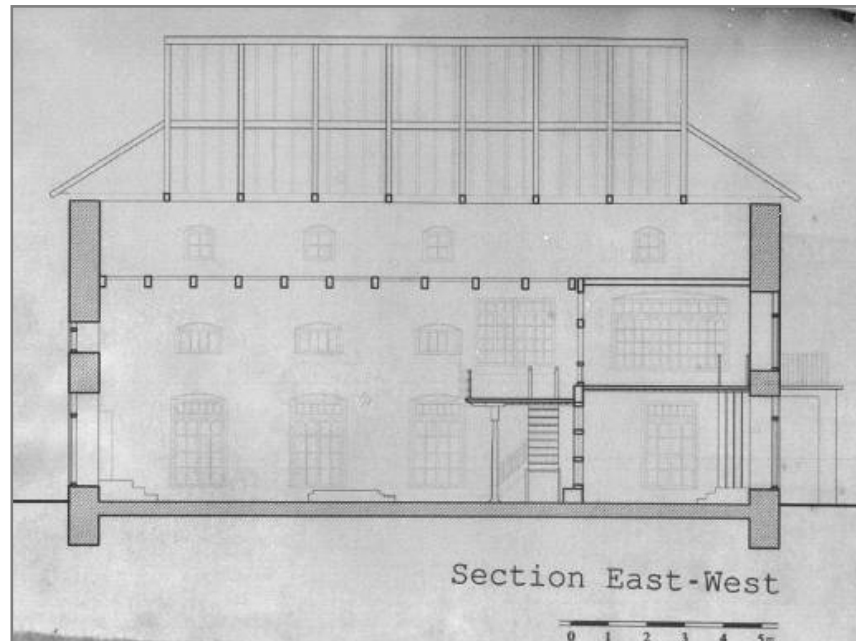
influenced by the same European source since many were imported from Belgium and the Netherlands (Katz and Goldberg 1993, 74.) Oil lanterns and chandeliers were the only source of lighting in this synagogue and others in Kerala until the buildings were electrified beginning in the 1960s. Today an unsightly track of exposed wires line the walls and balcony face of Tekkumbagam's sanctuary with interspersed fluorescent strip fixtures, receptacles, and switches.

Following in the custom of Kerala synagogue architecture, a balcony is positioned along the entry (east) wall of the sanctuary (Figures 191 and 192). This shallow and long feature fabricated out of wood engages in the side (north and south) and east walls, and as a cantilevered element it is also supported by two profiled brass columns that flank the entry into the prayer space proper. These load-bearing columns, placed 8'-4" on center from the east partition wall and 10'-8" on center from the north or south exterior walls, aesthetically recall the candle and incense candelabras throughout Kerala, and liturgically are said to pay homage to the freestanding columns of Boaz and Jachin that flanked the entry doors of the sanctuary building at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. These twin posts may have strong historical associations, yet ultimately they support a continuous wood lintel that runs from the north to south wall that in turn is rested upon by the wooden floor system of the balcony. At the face of the balcony are horizontal courses of wooden trim below twenty carved wood corbels. Hanging from the underside of the cantilevered ceiling of the balcony between some of the beaked-shaped brackets are several clear and colored glass oil lanterns. These bell-shaped and fluted fixtures, so common to Kerala buildings including all synagogues, were for years frequently imported from Belgium and the Netherlands, although today many are replicated in India and other places. Not used today, they have never been electrified but may have been filled with local coconut oil for lighting and aromatic purposes.

The balcony is reached via a steep 3'-4" wide J-shaped stair positioned in the northeast corner of the sanctuary (Figure 191). Crafted of richly stained wood except for

the concrete bottom riser, it was designed with open risers, lathe-turned newel posts, and lathe-turned balusters set between a stringer and shaped wood rail cap. Holding up the stair is a lathe-turned support below where the J-shaped stair turns. The balcony overlooks the double height prayer space and measures 9'-6" wide x 32'-5" long. Its floor is finished with wide planks of raw wood running the long direction (north-south). The most prominent feature of the long and narrow space is the second *tebah*. The bowed featured is centered along the guardrail running the full span of the space. This 39" high railing is made up of three stacked rows of lathe-turned, closely spaced balusters that are held in place by four rows of horizontal wood members running from wall to wall: one serving as a sole plate along the floor, two within the body of the guardrail, and the fourth performing double duty as a handrail cap. The reading table (a thin flat slab of wood) of the second *tebah* is coplanar with the top of the handrail, or 39" high, and the surface is 16" deep and 47" wide (Figure 192). Running along the bowed edge of the reading table is a double-tiered rail of a similar design to the guardrail. Four finials posts, two at the ends of the first tier and two at the second one, accentuate the upstairs *tebah*. In Kerala synagogue fashion, it was regularly draped by a *mappah*, or decorative cloth.

Adjacent, or to the west, of the balcony in Kerala synagogue tradition is the women's seating area. This space is the same size as the *azara* directly below. Separating these two spaces is the *mechitza*, or screen wall, although compared to other Kerala synagogues it is of a far simpler design (Figure 192). It is a half wall with a knee base veneered in chunam supporting a stained wood partition with rectangular raised panels carved in an elliptical shape. Centered on the *mechitza* is a pair of doors: made of wood, they feature two panels each with the upper one empty and the lower is a raised solid design. The metal hardware is a sliding bolt into an eyelet. These doors, resting on a high wooden threshold, swing into the women's area. The space is fitted out with a stained wood plank and dropped beam ceiling, a wide plank floor, and whitewashed



Figures 185 and 186/TEKKUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM  
MEASURED DRAWINGS  
(CENTER FOR JEWISH ART, HEBREW UNIVERSITY)



Figures 187 and 189/TEKKUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM EXTERIOR  
(V. ISSAC SAM, LEFT, AND ASSOCIATION OF KERALA JEWS, RIGHT)

189/AZARA (PHOTOGRAPH BY V. ISSAC SAM)

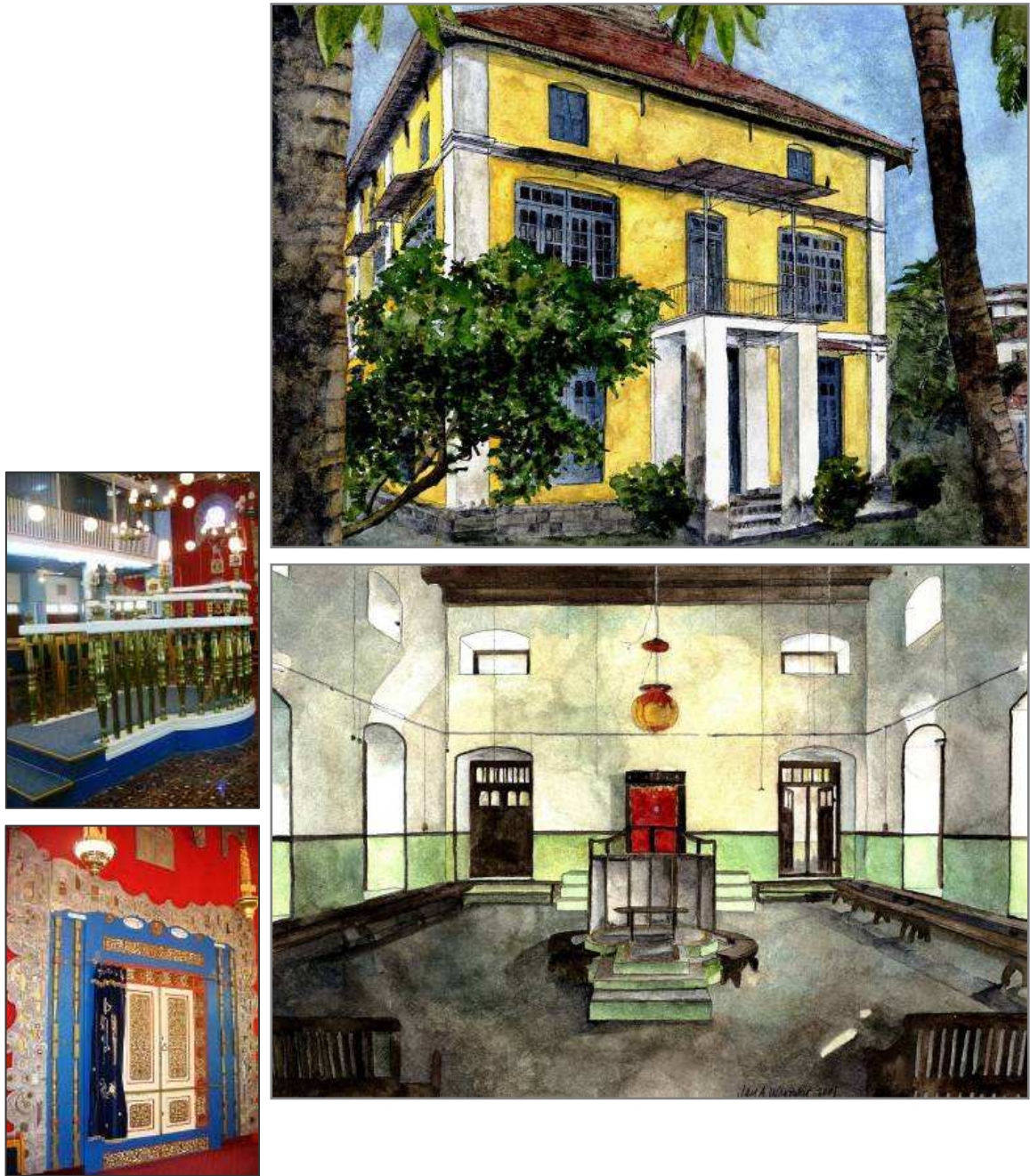




Figure 190/TEKKUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM SANCTUARY  
(PHOTOGRAPH BY V. ISSAC SAM)



Figures 191 and 192/  
SANCTUARY LOOKING TOWARDS SECOND TEBAH/  
WOMEN'S GALLERY TOWARDS BALCONY  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY V ISSAC SAM)



Figures 193 and 194/TEKKUMBAGAM, ERNAKULAM EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR (JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)

Figures 195 and 196/REMOVEDTEBAH AND HECKAL, NOW IN MOSHAV NEVATIM SYNAGOGUE IN ISRAEL (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)



chunam walls. Set within the thick walls are window units consisting of a side by side pair or triple grouping of french doors with wood-framed and colored (green, orange, or purple) glass transoms above. They are made of wood and darkly stained. Today the women's seating area is filled with odd furniture, storage chests, glass dome lighting fixtures, old documents, decommissioned *Sefer* Torahs and prayer books, and an assortment of other items. Some of these objects once belonged to the Tekkumbagam Synagogue in Erkanulam, and others were moved here from other synagogues. At one time the space was filled with benches for seating to accommodate the women and their children during the prayer service. A steep wooden stair in the northeast corner leads down to the *azara*.

With only a minute Malabari Jewish community living in Kochi, the synagogue has not been an active house of prayer since 1972. Over the years, however, it has been relatively well maintained and it is currently in adequate condition, although its roof leaks in place. In 1995, the Association of Kerala Jews sold off some land adjacent to the Jewish cemetery in Ernakulam, and some of the proceeds were placed in reserve to be used for the maintenance of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue (Josephai 2008). In more recent times, the former synagogue has been used for communal meetings of the Kerala Jews since the venue seen as a suitable place for social and business matters. Today, however, the building is very rarely used (Hacco 2010).

In July 2009, the Tekkumbagam Synagogue was the center of a controversy when an article appeared in the *Jerusalem Post* reporting that the Association of Kerala Jews planned to sell the synagogue building (Michael Freund 2009). The buyer was said to be a local developer who planned to construct a residential building on the site. Although Isaac Joshua, the president of the Association of Kerala Jews denied the report, public protest ensued. As a result, the Kerala office of the Department of Archeology visited the synagogue and prepared a report. Even though the building could not be listed



as an historic structure since it only dated from the 1930s, Tekkumbagam Synagogue did become a designated cultural landmark. As a result, the former synagogue will likely remain standing in years to come.

## **CHAPTER 15    KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM**

Kerala's Malabari Jews have lived in Ernakulam, the commercial and congested center of Kochi on its eastern mainland, for many centuries. These Jews maintained two Malabari synagogues as well as a religious school in the center of the district well into the twentieth century. Today the Kadavumbagam Synagogue on Market Road and the Tekkumbagam Synagogue around the corner on Jews Street mid-block towards Broadway are no longer functioning houses of prayer since the two congregations are so diminished, but they stand as testament to Kochi's many years of religious and social tolerance.

During the mid-1950s and 1960s, many of the Malabar Jews who were members of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue immigrated to Israel, and the congregation dwindled. Until the early 1970s the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, with Meir Simon serving as its manager, was still substantially intact. By 1972, the synagogue had closed and within two years its Torah scrolls were transported to the synagogue at *Moshav* Nevatim in Israel, an agricultural community where many of its former members had resettled and which now hosts the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center. In 1975, a storm struck Ernakulam and caused serious water damage to the synagogue. The roof and walls were compromised and foundation damage required the entire structure to be hydraulically lifted. Making matters worse, in 1978 thieves broke into the synagogue and stole some of its contents. In 1979, the remaining community passed the guardianship of the building to one of its long-standing members, Elias Josephai. For the next six years, the Kadavumbagam Synagogue lay vacant until in 1985 it entered a new life when the guardian, with 1200 rupees, established a plant and fish store on March 13 in the

building. The former synagogue has since been known as “Cochin Blossoms” (Josephai 2006 and 2008).

The Kadavumbagam Synagogue, substantially set back from the busy street and approached along a long and narrow passage, is unusual to other synagogues in Kerala for its additional large room in front of the usual arrangement of spaces: *azara* followed by the sanctuary (Figure 197). This extra space, a later addition to the synagogue compound and the one seen from the street, was built as a communal hall and Jewish school. Today it serves as the main area of the business and is crowded with fish tanks and related wares. The façade of this additional space is notable for its two angled walls, rust-colored quoins with stylized classical capitals and bases, and beefy trim painted the same rust color around the fenestration (Figure 198). The walls are whitewashed and the roof, with its three foot overhangs, is made of exposed wood covered with terracotta tiles. The shop owner has over the years spent his own time and money to renovate portions of the Kadavumbagam Synagogue, although the work is incomplete. He is not in a position to transfer control of the building to the Jewish community, and for this reason there cannot be any serious effort to restore the synagogue fully and make it available as a dedicated cultural site.

Although its history cannot be verified since written records or physical evidence do not exist, narratives claim that the original Kadavumbagam Synagogue was constructed in or around the year 1000 in the port town of Cranganore twenty one miles to the north of Ernakulam. During the medieval period, the Moors arrived on the shores of Kerala and aligned themselves with the native leadership. Since spices were a valuable local commodity and its trade was lucrative and competitive, the Moors saw the Jews, who were involved in the spice trade, as competition that needed to be quelled. Persecuted as a result, narratives claim that the Jews abandoned their synagogues and resettled in Ernakulam in 1154. There they were provided relative safety and protection under the tolerant and sympathetic Rajah of Cochin. In 1200, they are said to have built

the Kadavumbagam Synagogue (Sassoon 1932, 880). Another narrative goes that Jews, faced by persecution by the Portuguese during the mid-sixteenth century, fled Cranganore by boat and settled in Ernakulam. It was then that they were provided the protection under the Rajah of Cochin. A story also goes that the Jews of Cranganore and its surrounding areas were persecuted three times, by the Moors in the mid-twelfth and early sixteenth centuries and by the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century, and on three occasions they arrived in Ernakulam.

According to Elias “Babu” Josephai, the current guardian of the former synagogue and the owner of the business that now occupies the space, the building as it stands today dates to the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries (Josephai 2008 and 2009). It is Josephai’s claim that the two-storied front section seen from the road was added to a marginally wider and higher building of the sixteenth century approximately a century later (Figure 197). Both sections replaced any earlier structures of unknown dates that are believed to have stood on the same site. Today the synagogue is located on Market Road, the central spine of Ernakulam’s busy and chaotic market area, and is approached along a long and narrow passage lined with plants. It was common to Kerala synagogues to have some type of gatehouse facing the road, yet there is not one here. It is unclear whether such an entry structure ever existed since no recorded evidence or even narrative to indicate this. It would seem, based on the Kerala synagogue *parti*, or general layout of spaces, that a form of an entry building or at least gate would have once stood. At present there are security gates here, and a mid-twentieth century photograph shows an earlier design of swinging gates supported by posts (Elias Josephai 2008).

The sandy path that begins at the street and leads to the synagogue is on axis with the front façade. This two story massing features an upper floor that steps back marginally from plane of the first level, creating a shallow shelf at the intersection of the floors. Similar to other Kerala synagogues, the building is constructed of cut brick or small block sizes of laterite load-bearing walls veneered in white-washed chunam. The

building's two corners facing the street are broadly chamfered, so from the front Kadavumghagam Synagogue is half-octagonal in form (Figure 198). The angled wall intersections are demarcated by rusticated quoins that have been for years painted a deep rust color. At the ground level, the quoins rest on a profiled base, and at the top of the first floor they are topped by stylized capitals. The second floor quoins sit on the first floor's capitals, and their capitals are co-linear with the projecting trim that runs around the entire building just below the eave.

Casing the entry doors centered on the front elevation is the same rust-color detail, and above the doors is a rounded blind arch finished in chunam that is trimmed by a decorative band. It features an organic design in relief that is highlighted in the same rust color. Centered within each angled wall are tall casement shutters with another blind rounded arch above. Since these openings do not contain windows, the raised paneled shutters, locked in place by a simple metal hook, are all that protect and secure the synagogue's interior. At the second floor, above the front doors and first floor windows along the angled walls, are casement windows as well.

The front section is unusual for a Kerala synagogue. On the ground floor, it was used as a social hall and for overflow seating during the well-attended Jewish high holidays and on special occasions (Figure 207). This space measures 27'-4" x 45'-9" and today contains an L-shaped wooden stair in the northeast corner. The current stair appears to be a later replacement to an earlier one, yet the space likely always contained a way up to the upper floor spaces: for the women to their dedicated seating area during prayer, and to the children to the classroom. The upstairs rooms, with an open ceiling to the attic and wide plank wooden floor, once served as a Jewish school when the congregation was active, yet today they function as a crowded storeroom. To the west side of the large room, an area was partitioned off in the 1980s off to serve as an office for the current business. Access to the attic above the *azara* and sanctuary are from an opening to the west side of the upstairs space. Since the floor level is lower in the former-school

compared to the *azara* and sanctuary, a ladder is needed to climb up to the attic space. The attic above the *azara* and sanctuary was once used as Kadavumbagam Synagogue's *geniza*, or a storage place, in the Jewish tradition, for decommissioned items before they were eventually buried.

Since Malabari Jews once lived to all sides of the synagogue, they were able to conveniently approach the synagogue not only from the front but also along two side paths that led to doors on either side of the large front hall. The path to the north is today no longer discernable, and the high wall surrounding the synagogue property offers no hint that there used to be an open passage here. To the south, an axis remains although it has been altered and built upon. An outside raised concrete terrace, accessed by steps, leads to an elevated open space now filled with plants available for sale. To the far end of this courtyard is the adjacent street. Although the elevation level has been altered here, it is possible to visualize this being a former side approach to the synagogue. In this area was once some type of small free-standing structure used for additional classrooms for the Jewish school (Mira Eliya and Itzhak Eliya 2010).

Kadavumbagam Synagogue's front room, intended to be used for social and meeting functions as well as an overflow space for the sanctuary, and once furnished with benches, today functions as the main sales area of the Cochin Blossoms business and hence it is filled with fish tanks and a sales counter. The room measures 27'-4" x 45'-9" (minus the two 7'-6" x 7'-6" chamfered corners of the room) (Figure 197). Its thick walls, lined with large shuttered openings, are veneered in chunam, the ceiling is wood paneled with dropped beams, and the floor is covered with clay tiles. Behind the front room is the *azara*. Kadavumbagam Synagogue's *azara*, measuring 30'-1" x 16'-7", is cluttered today with the wares of the Cochin Blossoms business, but it once served a variety of purposes already discussed in my thesis (Figure 200). Like the front room, its walls are finished in chunam, the ceiling in wood with exposed dropped beams, and the floor is finished with ceramic tiles. The north and south elevations contain shuttered (no

glass) openings, and the east and south side both features three pairs of doors that swing into the sanctuary or front social hall

The *azara* leads to the double-height sanctuary that measures 30' x 46'-7" (Figure 201). Flanking the entry, in Kerala synagogue fashion, is the pair of columns that both frame the view into the sanctuary and support the gallery. These columns, set off from the entry wall 6'-10" on center and 8'-5" on center from each other, are made of brass and feature a profiled design. The lower ceiling beneath the balcony contrasts to the double height of the sanctuary. The sanctuary today is missing its central *tebah*, although its curvilinear masonry base (5'-4" in diameter) remains along with the two steps leading up to it. The fate of the *tebah* remains a mystery. The prayer space does retain its intricately carved teak 9'-6" wide *heckal* that is beautifully painted in gold, silver, red, white, and light blue. Three risers lead up to the *heckal*. The sanctuary's decorated ceiling also remains: it is made up of a design of narrow batten strips (painted green) that form small square panels. Each panel is decorated with a carved lotus flower that has been gilded (Figure 205). The walls of the sanctuary, veneered in chunam, are today whitewashed and accented with painted light blue wainscot and borders of green and red. The floors are finished with flat square concrete tiles. Hanging for the sanctuary ceiling and underside of the cantilevered balcony are a variety of reproduction colored glass and metal lanterns and lighting fixtures, including the *ner tamid*, or light that always burns in all synagogues adjacent to the *heckal*. Two large crystal chandeliers have hung within the space for many years, and today some of their glass shades are lost or damaged. Such a variety of lighting fixtures, seen in all Kerala synagogues, provide a distinct character and sense of place. Along the north and side walls of the sanctuary are three openings with a pair shutters (painted yellow) that swing out (Figure 202). Above these shutters are half-round transoms. Some years back, a metal grate was added over the windows for security purposes. Flanking the *heckal* are two more windows of the same design and paint color scheme.

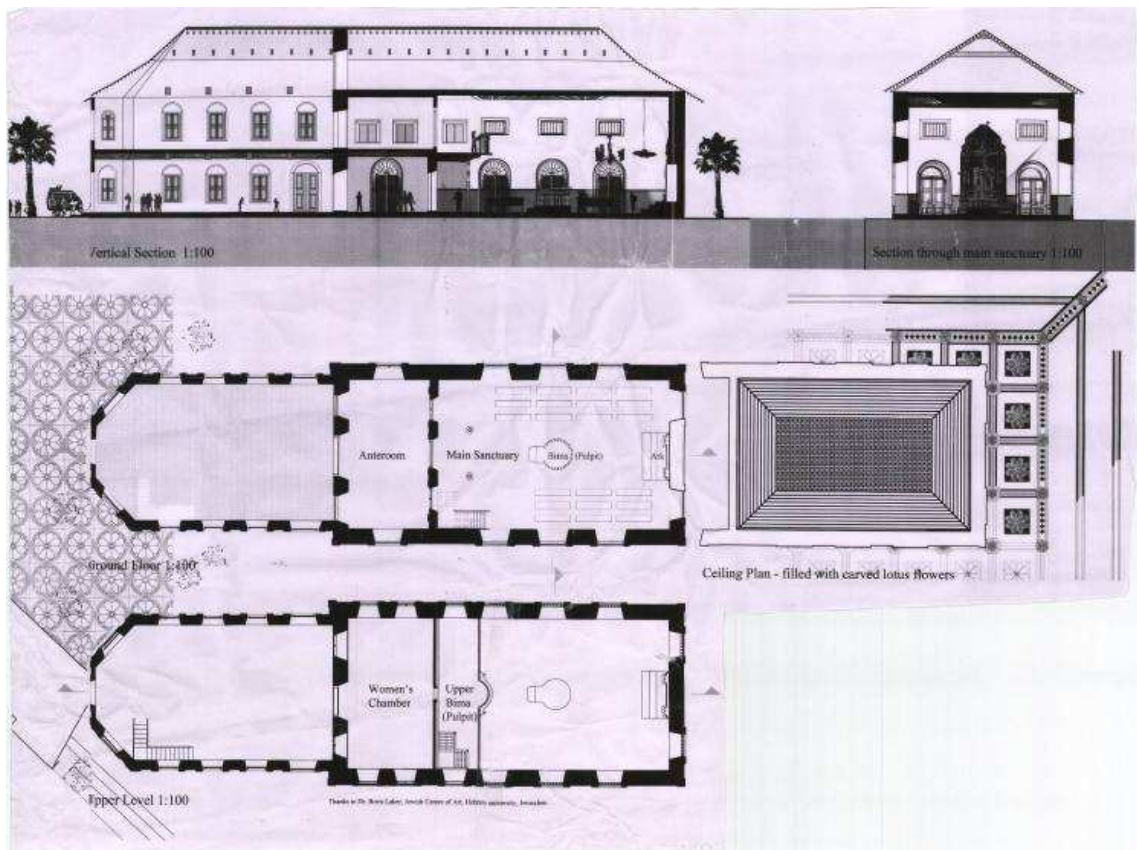


Figure 197/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM  
MEASURED DRAWINGS (BY AVI CHAI)



Figure 198/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM WATERCOLOR  
(JAY A. WARONKER, ARTIST)





Figures 199, 200, 201/KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM  
(V. ISSAC SAM, PHOTOGRAPHER)



Figures 202 - 210  
KADAVUMBAGAM SYNAGOGUE, ERNAKULAM  
(PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY A. WARONKER)

In Kerala synagogue fashion, Kadavumbagam Synagogue contains a long and shallow gallery spanning the width of the sanctuary (Figure 201). This space measures 7'-10" by 30'-4" with a 9'-7" high ceiling. It is accessed by a steep wooden stair in the northeast corner of the room (projecting 8'-6" into the room) that is painted bright red, white, and light blue. The entire gallery structure is made of wood, painted, and decorated with an assortment of carved lotus flowers, medallions, and other nature-based elements that are painted pink, red, blue, and gold (Figure 208). Centered on the painted wood guardrail of the gallery is the second *tebah*, which projects out into the double-height sanctuary. At the *tebah* is a railing that defines the area (Figure 209). This railing is set atop the balcony guardrail (38" inches high) and it twice steps up. The *tebah* railing is painted white, light green, dark blue, red, and gold. The floor of the gallery is finished with 12" wide planks of raw wood.

Continuing in local synagogue tradition, behind the gallery is the women's seating area (Figure 203). The size of this space, 17'-4" x 30'-4", matches the *azara* directly below. The ceiling is 10'-0" high. Dividing the women's area from the gallery is a comparatively simple *mechitza*, or partition wall (Figure 206). It is made of painted yellow 2X wooden members set on a low solid wall (4'-2" high) finished in chunam. Separating the gallery and the women's area are a pair of doors 2'-6" wide that are set on a 12" high threshold. The women's area, which features shuttered openings along its north and south walls, is finished in 12" wide planks of wood, a painted wood ceiling with dropped beams, and chunam walls. Set along the north and south walls are two windows each with solid shutters. Today the women's seating area is cluttered with items of the business, although the raw wooden benches remain. Centered on the east wall is a pair of doors leading to the former classroom spaces as well as the stair that took the women down to the front, or social hall.

Kadavambagam Synagogue is today surrounded by high and solid wall made of laterited and finished in chunam. The sandy soil courtyard between the building and wall varies in size from relatively narrow areas to the long sides to a generous space to the rear (west). This outdoor area is currently filled with hundreds of plants on sale through the Cochin Blossoms business, a well to the north, or various shade trees. The exterior walls of the former synagogues are only marginally maintained, and in many places the chunam veneer is soiled or has chipped area, leaving the laterite stone exposed. In vernacular Kerala fashion, the Kadavumbagam Synagogue contains deep (30") roof overhangs to protect the structure from the elements (Figure 210).

## CONCLUSION

It has always been important in my work documenting and writing about synagogue architecture that I include not only the grand in scale, richly decorated, or spatially complex examples, but also the more modest and less architecturally distinctive ones. Beautiful synagogues with lavish details, elaborate and costly materials, and the most progressive and bold designs have certainly been built over the years, and these can be feasts for the senses, yet they should alone not define the synagogue as a building genre. The origin of the word synagogue is, after all, Greek for a gathering space, which has little to do with the scale and the eminence of the space. A synagogue space can be, and sometimes is, about simplicity. In my travels to and study of synagogues from all periods and places over the years, I have come across the decorated mud and thatch huts of the Falasha Jews in Ethiopia – buildings that are as architecturally and culturally significant as the grandest synagogues of Paris, Budapest, Rome, New York, or Cape Town. I also recall visits as a child to the modest structure in the town of Dillon, South Carolina where my mother's family prayed or, in more recent years, to the equally understated Midlands synagogues in Zimbabwe. To their respective congregations, the buildings were their religious homes, and they were much loved.

Throughout history and the world, Jews were often not able to afford, chose not to on their own volition, or were restricted by political, social, or religious forces to build large, well-marked, and fancy synagogues. This particularly applied to the exterior of buildings, which were on public display and more restricted or controlled. Many ended up being small, simple spaces with minimal detail or architectural flair. More about construction versus architecture, these buildings rarely expressed any clear stylistic or aesthetic intent or agenda. They are, nevertheless, still synagogues in the truest

expression of the word which, in the purest form of the building typology, mark a place for gathering.

It needs to be argued that these ordinary buildings, which often times incorporated simple local materials and vernacular building techniques, served the religious, social, and communal needs of their respective congregations just as well that the more lavishly monumental and highly decorated ones with imported products and the most skilled craftsmen. In a quieter, more modest, and perhaps dignified way, they too are physical manifestations of a Jewish community, and hence are on equal footing with even the most extravagantly or intricately conceived synagogue.

The synagogues of Kerala, far from grand in scale or incorporating the most lavish of building materials, may also not be the most understated structures, yet they are prime examples of this more understated logic. They are structures within the canon of architectural history that beautifully express the influences of a variety of local and foreign, religious and secular construction traditions on the ancient Jewish building typology. They are all clear examples of how the vernacular traditions of a place, ones created out of climatic and cultural factors and concerns, influenced the development of a formula for several rounds of synagogue design and construction.

As I have stated in this thesis, synagogues have rarely conformed to stylistic rules wherever and whenever they are built or, as a type of building, been resolved in unique or identifiable terms. While the synagogues built over the centuries in Kerala may not be wholly unique and instantly recognizable as Jewish houses of prayer minus their obvious liturgical elements, such as the *heckal* and *tebah*, they did establish a design pattern specific to their place. They are architecture which sensibly responded to the landscape and climate as well as made use of local materials and construction techniques. Their designs also were shaped and influenced by many human factors, friend and foe, who built in India. Yet along the way, the Jews of Kerala established their own aesthetic. They managed to blend the vernacular and other design traditions in their buildings with

their own cultural and liturgical needs. A distinct sequence and arrangement of spaces and zones, both indoor and outdoor ones, was established. As a result, a distinct way of realizing a synagogue came into being.

The Kerala Jews were never a homogeneous community who spoke with a single voice. They originated from various parts of the world at different times. Definite subgroups were established, and they normally lived separate lives including when it came time to pray. Some of the Kerala Jews were wealthy and pursued professional occupations, while others were less affluent and were involved in working class trades. Communities of Jews existed in the city, small towns, or villages. Regardless of these differences, they communally established a tradition of building synagogues in a certain way. While their details and arrangements vary from place to place, the overall pattern of a compound with distinct exterior, partially enclosed, and fully interior spaces linked in a processional path emerged. The incorporation of an *azara*, gallery/balcony level, separate seating from men and women, the unique second *tebah* with women's seating area behind accessed by its own stair, and the shape and expression of the *heckal* and ground-floor *tebah* filtered from one synagogue to the next. The fact that, at some point early on, a prototype for a synagogue was created in Kerala and subsequently adhered to is significant.

While the architectural achievements of the synagogues in Kerala will always be overshadowed in India by the exquisite stone work of Hindu temple builders, the carved-away Buddhist rock-cut *chaityas* with their stupas and *viharas*, Rajput forts and places, Mughal emperors with their tombs, the exuberant white-washed Portuguese Baroque churches in Goa, the colonial work of Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, or of Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn of the early post-colonial period, the study and documentation of more modest Kerala synagogues should be viewed as equally significant when examining Indian culture and history as a whole. Architectural historian Carol Krinsky eloquently wrote in her book on European synagogues some years ago that “architecture,



like politics, is an art of the possible. Kings or parliaments or great corporations can order spectacular structures and will see to it that their dreams come true. Less powerful people built as best they can” (Krinsky 1985, 1).

In a time when the study of less than monumental or high architecture is gaining both respectability and an audience, the survey and documentation of the synagogues of Kerala is a timely undertaking. It seeks to examine how a tiny minority living in a small outpost of the Diaspora for centuries if not millennia managed to maintain their own identity living among majority neighbors despite centuries of political and social change. The results of how the Jews of Kerala chose to express themselves architecturally in their synagogues are interesting and even surprising. While monumental buildings and those designed by leading architects will always receive top billing among many historians and much of the public at large, the study of more ordinary, vernacular buildings, especially in relationship to their cultural and natural context, is an area of architectural history and theory which does have appeal to a curious audience and should therefore not be overlooked.

The study and documentation of the synagogues built in Kerala is timely. Beginning in the mid-1950s with the mass immigration of the community to Israel, the majority of the buildings were left behind and, over time, they mostly ceased to operate as houses of prayer. Decommissioned, some were converted to other private and public functions. Even with those synagogues they did manage to remain active, the small and aging remaining community did not have the means to always properly maintain them. As a consequence, especially in light of Kerala’s particularly wet and hot humid, they suffered. In very recent years, however, as a result of renewed interest by the former Kerala Jewish community now living in Israel, other sympathetic foreign Jews, historic preservationists and architects, anthropologists and historians, and particularly leading forces of the government of Kerala who have come to recognize the cultural (and touristic) value of these buildings as part of the State’s centuries-old history, the Kerala



synagogues are entering a bright new phase. Most of them are now being preserved and better maintained, and many are even being carefully restored by professionals. As part of this process and tide, this thesis places these extant buildings carefully within a local, Indian, and Jewish architectural context so that a domestic as well as international audience can learn about and come to understand and appreciate them as invaluable cultural and historical landmarks set on the Kerala landscape.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The word *Kerala* also has an interesting origin, especially because of the popular myth concerning its name. Many people claim that the word came from the name of the state tree: the *keram* or coconut tree. However, this is just a myth; the name actually came from a combination of the words *Chera* (the dynasty that ruled Kerala beginning in the medieval period) and *aazhi* (sea).

<sup>2</sup> In the similar way that the synagogues of Kerala incorporated Portuguese colonial architectural details and devices, the Jews of Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) Mozambique, who originated in Europe, North Africa, and Palestine in the 1890s and built their first synagogue in 1926, approved a design in the Portuguese Neo-Baroque style. Considering that the Portuguese had expelled Jews in Portugal in 1497 who had refused or not been forced conversion to Catholicism, and that the government of the country did not apologize for this act until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is indeed interesting that such a design approach would be favored by the Jews.

<sup>3</sup> Population statistics were taken from the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, and the Jewish Virtual Library, a division of the America-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise.

<sup>4</sup> The Paradesi Synagogue of 1568, although altered and rebuilt in part over the years, is considered to be the oldest Jewish house of prayer in the British Commonwealth according to the World Monuments Fund, the organization responsible for restoring the synagogue in part in the late 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> Only the synagogue in Thana outside of Mumbai can be said to be thriving today, and a few years ago the synagogue building was actually expanded.

<sup>6</sup> Of the 35,000 Indian Jews, 22,000 belonged to the Bene Israel communities of Mumbai, Pune, and Ahmedabad; and 11,000 were Baghdadis living in Bombay, Pune, and Kolkatta. The small balance included a composite community in New Delhi and the Bene Meseba of India's northeastern hill states.

<sup>7</sup> The exact number of Kerala Jews is difficult due to the ambiguity of who is a Jew based on matriarchal or patriarchal lineage, or mixed marriages, however Shalva Weil (an Israeli anthropologist who has devoted more than thirty-five years to studying the Kerala Jewish community), Tirza Lavi (a former Kerala Jew now living in Israel), Galia Hacco (another former Kerala Jew now living in Israel), and I during our joint visit to Kerala in January 2010 carried out our own census in the car while driving to the Parur Synagogue.

<sup>8</sup> Kerala as a state dates to 1956 with the passing of the States Organization Act by the government of India.

<sup>9</sup> A cubit, based on the length of a forearm, is 18" or 46 cm.

<sup>10</sup> There are three types of specially processed animal skin or parchment used for the Torah: *gevil*, *klaf* (also *qlaf*), and *duchusto*.

<sup>11</sup> The Philistines took the Ark back to Ashdod, their capital city in the south of Canaan, where they placed it in the temple of their god Dagon. The next day, however, they found the idol fallen on its face. After replacing the statue, they found it the next day decapitated, with only its trunk remaining, and soon afterward, the entire city of Ashdod was struck with a plague. The Philistines moved the Ark to the city of Gath, and from there to Ekron, but whatever city the Ark was in, the inhabitants were struck with plague. After seven months, the Philistines decided to send the Ark back to the Israelites, and accompanied it with expensive gifts. The Ark was taken back to Beit Shemesh, and, according to the Midrash, the oxen pulling the Ark burst into song as soon as it was once again in Israel's possession. The actual text of the story, however, tells a much grimmer tale: The men of Beit Shemesh were punished for staring disrespectfully at the Ark, and many were killed with a plague.

<sup>12</sup> The two pillars had their parallel not only at Egyptian monuments in the form of flanking obelisks but also at Tyre, Byblus, Paphos, and Telloh.

<sup>13</sup> The Philistines set the Ark beside an image of their god Dagon in his temple at Ashdod, where its presence caused such havoc that after seven months it was sent back, with two sets of golden ex-votos as an indemnity.

<sup>14</sup> Traditional rabbinic sources state that the First Temple stood for 410 years and based on the second century work Seder Olam Rabbah, place construction in 832 BCE and destruction in 422 BCE, 165 years later than popular (secular) estimates.

- <sup>15</sup> It is believed that some Jews elected to stay in Babylonia on their own accord.
- <sup>16</sup> The historian Josephus lived from 37 to 101 CE.
- <sup>17</sup> The Mishna the first part of the Talmud, is a collection of early oral interpretations of the scriptures (basically the entire body of Jewish law) that was passed down and means the entire body of Jewish religious law that was passed down and developed before 200 CE.
- <sup>18</sup> In the summer of 2010, I visited the archeological site of a synagogue dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE near Modiin in central Israel just to the east of Tel Aviv.
- <sup>19</sup> Synagogues were built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Karachi, Pakistan and Rangoon, Burma.
- <sup>20</sup> The Levites were members of the He Hebrew tribe of Levi who were the only Israelite tribe that received cities but no tribal land "because the Lord the God of Israel himself is their inheritance" (de Breffney). The Tribe of Levi served particular religious duties for the Israelites and had political responsibilities as well.
- <sup>21</sup> Krauss, pp. 366-368. For the use of *tebah*, see Encyclopaedia Judaica II, s.v. *Almemor*, by I. Elgogen.
- <sup>22</sup> In a religious setting outside of the context of the synagogue yet influenced by the architecture of the Temple, the design of the Bernini's bronze baldacchino at St. Peter's in Rome drew from the baldacchino of Old St. Peter's, which had been inspired by the columns of Boaz and Jachin.
- <sup>23</sup> The Chabad Jews support this position and have vested much attention on these communities.
- <sup>24</sup> The Moors had a presence in India during the medieval period and the Portuguese rule of the Malabar Coast ran from 1498 to the 1660s, then followed by Dutch rule from the 1660s to 1795 before the arrival of the British.
- <sup>25</sup> Isaac Joseph and Babu Josephi Elias, two of the remaining 'Black' Kerala Jews mentioned in separate interviews conducted in 2008 that, according to the narrative, the first Tekkumbagam Synagogue in Ernakulam dates from around 1200.
- <sup>26</sup> Jews are believed to have moved to Kochangadi soon after the 1341 Periyar River flood.
- <sup>27</sup> The inscription is now inset in the courtyard wall of the Paradesi Synagogue, which is located in Mattancherry which is now a part of Kochi proper, but then a neighboring village to Kochangadi.
- <sup>28</sup> The Paradesi Synagogue is found on the northern end of Jews Street, and the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue is located down the way in the southern section of Jew Town past the intersecting road leading to the ferry jetty. Past Jew Town to the south is Kochangadi, where the first Cochin synagogue, now long gone, was built in 1344.
- <sup>29</sup> On Market Street is the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue, and it is now the home of the "Cochin Blossoms" plant and aquarium business. On Jews Street, found between Market Road and Broadway, is the Tekkumbhagam Synagogue. It sits back behind a tall iron gate and row of buildings along the road.
- <sup>30</sup> Yves Tardy, from the *French Institut National Polytechnique de Toulouse* and the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, calculated that laterites cover about one-third of the earth's continental land area. Lateritic soils are the subsoils of the equatorial forests, of the savannas of the humid tropical regions, and of the Sahelian steppes. They cover most of the land area between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn; areas not covered within these latitudes include the extreme western portion of South America, the southwestern portion of Africa, the desert regions of north-central Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the interior of Australia.
- <sup>31</sup> It is this laterite that is believed to have caused the silting of the port of Cranganore in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the shifting of a trade base from there to Kerala. As Cranganore's importance declined, the remaining Jews (who had not been forced out by the Moors and later the Portuguese) joined Jews already living in and around Cochin.
- <sup>32</sup> Chunam, a durable and easy to produce material, was also popularized by the European colonists in India and other places where they left their mark.
- <sup>33</sup> The *Silparatna* of Sri Kumara was translated by No. P. Unni of the Department of Sanskrit at the University of Kerala in 1922. T. Ganapati Sastri (ed). *The Silparatna of Sri Kumara*. Trivandrum: Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, Number LXXV, 1922 (translated by N. P. Unni).
- <sup>34</sup> Ronald Bernier lists some thirty-five varieties that, according to the *Silparatna*, are not conducive to happiness if used to build.
- <sup>35</sup> Among the fig trees used are the country fig, pipal, and the banyan – a symbolic tree in Hinduism.
- <sup>36</sup> A *yava* is 1/6 to 1/8 of an *angula*.
- <sup>37</sup> There is no existing documentation concerning a Jewish equivalent to the Hindu *stapathi*, or master builder for the synagogues in Kerala. There is, of course, the tradition of placing the *heichal* in the direction of Jerusalem, so this alone begins to orient the sanctuary.

<sup>38</sup> Two areas in the Indian subcontinent also have temples made of wood. One is Nepal and the other Himachal Pradesh near the Himalayas. The scholar Ronald Bernier has studied both the temples of Kerala and of the Himalayas in his book *Splendours of Kerala and Wooden Temples of the Western Himalayas* but does not link the two styles in any way. The source of design of the two areas has clearly evolved separately. Many have tried to compare Japanese wooden temples with the ones in Kerala, but it is clear there is no connection. The structures follow similar design technology such as the trusses and rafters but here the similarity ends. The details of construction are completely different and proportion follows different norms.

<sup>39</sup> The *tebah* is raised off the floor level, it is often said, for functional reasons – making it easier for those in the synagogue to see – and for religious ones – so that everyone can sense the sacred standing of the service. In fact, there is no rule in Judaism that requires the *tebah* to be elevated, but rather it is interpretational.

<sup>40</sup> Although most associated with Hindu religious buildings, the term *garbha griha* also applies to Jain and Buddhist places of worship. This small unlit chamber, located in the center of the temple with its only opening faces east, is traditionally a cube shaped room, without decoration. Only a *pujari*, or priest, may enter this sacred space to worship the deity image or symbol with flowers, water, lights, incense, and offerings symbolizing the five elements.

<sup>41</sup> The Amidah is the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. Observant Jews recite the Amidah at each of three prayer services in a typical weekday: morning, afternoon, and evening.

<sup>42</sup> The Book of Daniel is a part of the Hebrew Bible. Originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, it is set during the Babylonian Captivity, a period when Jews were deported and exiled to Babylon following the siege of Jerusalem of 597 BC. The book revolves around the figure of Daniel, a Judean who becomes Chief Magician in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon from 605 to 562 BC.

<sup>43</sup> *Halakhah* is the collective body of Jewish religious law, including biblical law and later talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions.

<sup>44</sup> At the time that this congregation immigrated to Israel, the *heckal* was sent on ahead. Since no Kerala Jewish community was already in place to receive it, the *heckal* ended up in moshav Nehalim, founded as an agricultural cooperative made up of European-origin Jews.

<sup>45</sup> This *ner tamid*, measuring 47” high and 18” in diameter, is today in the collection of the Sir Isaac and Lady Edit Worlson Museum, Hechal Shlomo, Jerusalem.

<sup>46</sup> The Parur (actually North Parur) where the synagogue is found should not be confused with two others Parurs in the area around Kochi, both found well to its south.

<sup>47</sup> The *ner tamid* is a reminder of God's eternal presence and the light that burned in the Temple of Jerusalem. It also symbolizes the guiding light of the Torah.

<sup>48</sup> Mudaliyar is the office and title of the Jewish community leader.

<sup>49</sup> My visit to the Parur synagogue in July 2009 found the building in the worst condition ever in my years of visits. It was clear that the limited periodic maintenance performed in recent years by various Jewish parties had ceased.

<sup>50</sup> Ruby Daniel recalled that well into the twentieth century it was a practice for Kerala Jews from all the communities to make vows to contribute money or oil to light lamps at the Parur Synagogue. These vows were sometimes made to children, so they would be taken to carry out this action. In return, the Parur Jews would give a small party.

<sup>51</sup> Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg note on page 69 of *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* that the Jews sent petitions at one point to both the Maharajah of Travancore and to the British viceroy asking them to restrain the noise in the area coming from Christian ceremonies, and Lord Reading, Indian only Jewish viceroy, obliged and erected the pillars to post the limits beyond which Christian processions could not pass.

<sup>52</sup> This family, the Namias, have been the key keepers of the Parur synagogue in recent years since the Simons, who lived across the street from the synagogue or in the building itself left, for Israel in the early 2000s.

<sup>53</sup> The *tebah* is raised off the floor level, it is often said, for functional reasons – making it easier for those in the synagogue to see – and for religious ones – so that everyone can sense the sacred standing of the

service. In fact, there is no rule in Judaism that requires the *tebah* to be elevated, but rather it is interpretational.

<sup>54</sup> The removal and transport of the ark made possible by Della and Fred Worms of London.

<sup>55</sup> The Chennamangalam (or Chendamangalam) Synagogue (restored by the Kerala office of the Department of Archeology with funding with the Kerala Department of Tourism) features a permanent exhibition on its history and architecture (planned by Dr. Shalva Weil of the Hebrew University, Professor Jay Waronker of Southern Polytechnic State University, and Marian Sofaer of Palo Alto California). It opened in late February 2006. During the high tourism season, nearly 100 people from around the world visit the building each day.

<sup>56</sup> In my own effort to save Parur Synagogue, in 2009 I applied for a grant through the Jewish division of the World Monuments Fund to help restore the building. While the application was taken seriously, the Association of Kerala Jews were not particularly enthusiastic about the funding opportunity, preferring the opportunities offered to them by the government of Kerala during quiet negotiations, and this ultimately reflected on the decision of the WMF to not approve the application.

<sup>57</sup> The synagogue was restored using funds primarily from the Kerala Department of Tourism.

<sup>58</sup> Divekar fought in the British army during the Second Mysore War, and he was captured with some Bene Israel Jews and British solidiers. The Jewish lives were spared once Tipu Sultan's mother discovered their identities as members of the Kingdom of Israel, claiming that they were God's chosen people. One of the surviving soldiers, Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, settled in Bombay and, in 1796, founded the first Bene Israel synagogue – Shaar Haraḥamim, or Gate of Mercy.

<sup>59</sup> The commission published a report titled "Nostisias Dos Judeos De Cochim", which is an important document for the understanding the history of the Kerala Jewish community.

<sup>60</sup> The term "paradesi" is actually used by other non-indigenous Brahmins Hindus in India. It is applied also by Muslims of Kerala to fellow Muslims arriving from the West, for example.

<sup>61</sup> This line of the song describes Kadavumbagam Synagogue's ceiling, which was divided by beams into a grid of fifteen sections, with a carved lotus flower in the center of each.

<sup>62</sup> A kol is a unit of measurement equal to an English rod (16.5 feet).

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## GLOSSARY

**aliya:** Hebrew for literally “going up”; immigration to Israel.

**Ashkenazic** (Ashkenazi): The Jews of western, central, and eastern Europe.

**azara:** The anteroom or foyer specific to a synagogue in Kerala.

**bali-peethas:** Markings in the form of a set of stone pieces in Hindu temples made to reference the positions of *debas* (gods of the Hindu pantheon) in relation to the main idol.

**basilica:** A civic building type created by the ancient Roman made up of a large rectangular hall with side niches. In times, it became the precedent for early Christian churches and synagogues.

**bet ha midrash:** A synagogue.

**bimah:** A pulpit or platform from which the *Sefer* Torah is read; Kerala synagogues are unique in having two of them.

**brit mila:** Circumcision ritual for a Jewish boy.

**Chair of Elijah:** A special chair in the vicinity of the *heckal* set aside for the Prophet Elijah during the circumcision ceremony.

**debas:** Gods of a Hindu pantheon.

**devir:** The Holy of Holies in the ancient Jewish Temple.

**fleche:** A tall and thin spire-like architectural element with a pointed top.

**gallery:** The upper level of a building overlooking the main space.

**garbha-griha:** A shrine proper’ sanctum sanctorum of a temple.

**gemara:** A part of the Talmud, the collection of rabbinic commentaries on the Torah.

**ghata-prasada:** A kind of circular Hindu temple perhaps simulating a *ghata*, or pitcher.

**gopara:** A gateway with a tower above for a temple, palace, or city.

**hakafah:** A procession around’ procession carrying the *Sefer* Torah on *Shimhat Torah*.

**halakha:** A body of Jewish law.

**hasti-hasta:** A banister in the shape of an elephant's trunk on either side of a flight of steps.

**heckal:** Also called the ark; the place where the *Sefer Torah* is kept.

**heckalot:** Plural of *heckal*.

**jali:** A perforated pattern of openings, windows and false niches.

**jati:** Caste.

**kapporet:** The lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

**Kerala:** "Land of the coconuts," the southwestern-most State of India along the Arabian Sea.

**linga:** The aniconic form of the Hindu god Shiva in the shape of a phallus. It is fixed into a pedestal called the *linga-pitha*.

**linga-pitha:** The pedestal containing the *linga*.

**lite:** the glass pane of a window.

**lupa:** The rafters used for making the ceiling.

**Magen David:** Star of David.

**Malabar Coast:** The region of India where Kerala lies.

**Malayalam:** The language of Kerala.

**mappah:** The cloth covering the pulpit.

**mechitza:** A partition wall separating the women's seating area from the sanctuary where the men sit in a synagogue.

**menorah:** A seven-branch candelabrum found in the biblical sanctuary and Jerusalem Temple.

**meshuharim:** manumitted slaves said to have been converted to Judaism by Kerala Jews.

**mikveh:** The immersion bath used for ritual purification in Judaism.

**minyan:** A quorum for worship in Judaism; traditionally, ten or more adult Jewish males in Orthodox congregations, although women are counted in Conservative and Reform synagogues.

**midrash:** In Kerala, a *beit midrash*, or Jewish school.

**moshav:** An agricultural community in Israel.

**mudaliyar:** Leader of the entire Kerala Jewish community; a position established by the Rajah of Cochin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**nala:** A water chute.

**nalukattu:** A traditional house in Kerala with four or more wings arranged around one or more courtyards.

**ner tamid:** A light in front of the *heckal* in the synagogue that always burning, it is meant to remind us of the omnipresence of god.

**Nayar:** Hindu caste of high status in Kerala.

**oikoumene:** The inhabited world of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.

**padma:** Lotus.

**padma-prasada:** A type of circular Hindu temple.

**palli:** The Malayalam word for a religious building, including a synagogue.

**panchayat:** A municipality in Kerala State.

**Paradesi:** The “foreigners” Jewish community in Kerala.

**phalaka:** An abacus of a pillar-capital.

**pitha:** A pedestal or platform.

**pradakshina-patha:** The circumambulatory path.

**prakara:** An enclosure wall.

**rajah:** The king.

**Sefer Torah:** The parchment scroll on which the Torah is written.

**Shabbat:** The Sabbath.

**shamash:** The caretaker of a synagogue.

**Shemini Atzeret:** The Jewish festival at the end of *Sukkot*, the day before *Simhat Torah*.

**Sephardic:** Pertaining to the Jewish communities of the Iberian peninsula or their descendants.

**shohet:** The ritual slaughterer of animals for Jews.

**Simhat Torah:** Jewish holiday celebrating the conclusion and new beginning of the annual cycle of Torah readings in the synagogues.

**soffit:** The underside of a roof overhang.

**sopher:** Scribe of the *Sefer Torah*.

**srikovil:** The sacrum sanctorum in a Hindu temple.

**sthapati:** An architect in traditional Kerala practice.

**talam:** A entry foyer.

**Talmud:** Record of legal decisions and discussion of ancient Jewish scholars; the fundamental work of the Oral Law that complements the Written Law.

**taranga-potika:** A kind of roll moulding of a corbel-bracket.

**Thachu Sashttra:** An ancient building code or science of Kerala.

**Tebah (plural = tebot):** The *bimah*, or pulpit in a synagogue.

**Torah:** The first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

**ullam:** The first room of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem.

**vallam:** The traditional covered boat in Kerala made of wood.

**vimana:** An entire temple compound; the term is used generally to denote south Indian temples.

**vrisha:** A kind of circular Hindu temple.

**vritta:** circular; also a type of circular shrine.

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